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AUT IS LOVE

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Arts

Nathan Selove

University of Northern Iowa

May 2019

ABSTRACT

This performance project argues for an alternative view of Autistics and romance. This is done from the perspective of a young adult man on the Autism Spectrum who tells the story of himself and his Autistic wife. The author makes the following arguments with the intent to educate neurotypicals about Autism and to empower Autistics: (1) Autistics are capable of romantic relationships and, as such, Autism is not a barrier to love; (2) Autistics are capable of empathy, especially with other Autistics; and (3) the romantic stories of Autistics must be heard.

Chapter one introduces the main arguments and the highlights of the story presented in *Aut Is Love*. Chapter two discusses relevant literature and research. Chapter three discusses the methodology used to write *Aut Is Love*. Chapter four is the text of the script, which functions as the analysis section. Chapter five concludes the arguments and makes a plea for future research.

AUT IS LOVE

A Thesis

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Nathan Selove

University of Northern Iowa

May 2019

This study by: Nathan Selove

Entitled: Aut Is Love

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

Date

Dr. Danielle Dick McGeough, Chair, Thesis Committee

Date

Dr. Paul J. Siddens, Thesis Committee Member

Date

Dr. Karen Mitchell, Thesis Committee Member

Date

Dr. Jennifer Waldron, Dean, Graduate College

Aut Is Love is dedicated to my wife, Jess Selove, who gave me a story to tell.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A major thanks to my thesis committee Dr. Danielle Dick McGeough, Dr. Paul J. Siddens, and Dr. Karen Mitchell providing me with direction and aid during all steps of the process of this thesis.

Thanks to my cast for doing the people in my life justice with your performance. Thanks to the crew for making that performance possible and smooth.

A huge thank you to my assistant director Kyle Chaska for volunteering his time to make this production possible (and for acting as my translator when I started going off on tangents).

A huge thank you to my stage manager Claire Kaufman helping to organize everyone's disorganized thoughts into coherent blocking, and for running a smooth show.

Special thanks to Philippa Siddens, Paul Siddens, Danielle McGeough, Jim Keane, Matt Gruemmer, Grace Mertz, and Amandajean Nolte. Thank you to my Department Head, Dean, and colleagues in the Department of Communication Studies. Thank you to Dianna Jones-Harris, Erin Zikmund, and the Department of Communication Studies' office staff. Thank you to the Lang Hall custodial staff.

And finally, thanks to my amazing, wonderful, and delightful wife, Jess Selove for giving me a great story that I could share with the world.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In first grade, a friend of mine flipped his pencil across the room. Everyone, including the teacher, laughed and my classmate quickly ran over to get his pencil. I proceeded to do the same thing. Nobody laughed. Instead, I was punished with a shortened recess.

I was nine years old when I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome (now referred to under the blanket term of Autism Spectrum Disorder). I have always been aware of social rules, but my ability to follow them is another matter. If I break a social rule, it is likely my action was no more intentional than if I accidentally followed a social rule. Like my experience in first grade with the pencil, I feel confused when I see other people break social rules without consequence. My parents told me that Neurotypicals (non-Autistics) know when it is okay to break rules.

My father, who is also on the spectrum, frequently tried to explain that, as an Autistic, I had to follow all of the social rules to keep out of trouble. He explained that Neurotypicals know instinctually when it is appropriate and when it is inappropriate to break or disrupt a social norm. I could not just mimic what I saw those around me do. I had to perform Neurotypicality. Ironically, it was my attempts at performing Neurotypicality that would cause me problems later in my dating life.

Social constructs surrounding institutional and discursive practices of romantic courtship simultaneously break and follow social norms. For a story of romance to be

unique, it must break rules. However, romance must fulfill certain requirements to be considered a romance in the first place. The balance comes from intention. If a person within a romantic interaction breaks a social rule, the assumption is that they did it on purpose. Thus, if breaking the social rule evokes a positive response from their partner, it is further evidence of the couple's compatibility. Conversely, if breaking a social rule evokes a negative response, the act is considered a blunder and a failure of character (Stokes, Newton, & Kaur, 2007). These neuro-normative assumptions treat the non-Autistic, or unimpaired mind, as the neutral state, leaving out the possibility that blunders are made due to a lack of awareness, understanding, function, or existence of the rules. As such, Autistics are often thought as incapable of having successful romantic relationships.

Dewinter, Vermeiren, Vanwesenbeeck, and Nieuwenhuizen (2016) found that the perceived incompatibility between romance and Autism begins with parents. Although it is common for parents of any children to underestimate the sexuality of their children, the discrepancy is much more apparent when looking at parents of Autistic children. Furthermore, evidence suggests that society is uncomfortable with the viewing of Autistics as sexual beings. Stereotypes of Autistics as asexual are prominent despite evidence to the contrary. Although there is a slightly higher percentage of asexuality among Autistics in comparison to the general population, a vast majority of Autistics identify as either heterosexual, gay, or bisexual (Dewinter, De Graaf, & Begeer, 2017).

In addition to Autistics having difficulty understanding social norms, the assumption that Autistics are not romantic is based on the idea that Autistics have trouble

feeling empathy—a requirement for successful romantic relationships (Lamport & Turner, 2014). However, as I demonstrate throughout this thesis, research on Autistics and empathy is based on their ability to empathize with Neurotypicals. Strunz et al. (2017) found that relationship satisfaction is significantly higher in relationships where both partners are Autistic. Autistics have less trouble empathizing with other Autistics. The measurement of an Autistic's ability to feel empathy is based on a neuro-normative model. Thus, current discussions about Autism and romance are dominated by Neurotypicals from a medical perspective.

The stories of asexual Autistics should not be disregarded, but at the same time, many Autistics do experience sexual attraction. In May of 2015, I met Jess. We immediately connected to one another. While attending a yard party, Jess and I found ourselves on opposite teams in a game of cornhole. The game led to a long conversation about Autism, feminism, service dogs, and family. Later that night, I realized I needed to get home to work on some papers for class. Jess offered to walk me to my car. We ended up standing on the front porch of her house talking for two hours. When Jess returned to the party our friends could not believe that we had been talking for that long. We exchanged numbers and texted constantly.

I was used to dating Neurotypicals and had learned the art of subtly. As I continued communicating with Jess, I tried to be subtle. Little did we know at the time, Jess, too, was Autistic. And, Autistics prefer direct communication to successfully decode messages (Baron-Cohen, & Wheelwright, 2004). Jess did not know that I was interested in her romantically until a friend pointed out how much we had been texting.

With the aid of a magic trick, I officially asked Jess to be my girlfriend on June 15, 2015, and our relationship continued to develop. I actually had a lot of experience dating, but I did not have as much experience dating other Autistics. This led to several instances of miscommunication. Some of these instances resulted in funny stories that we still laugh at to this day. Others created tense moments that put a strain on our relationship.

Despite fears brought on by past relationships, Jess and I stayed together. Halfway through my senior year of college, I started to look at potential graduate schools. Many of the ones that I was most interested in were in the Midwest region of the United States. At the time, we lived in Virginia and so we would have to make a choice: move together or end our relationship. Neither of us believed that we could maintain a long-term relationship. When I first brought this up to Jess, I asked her if she could ever see herself moving to the Midwest with me. However, I failed to make it clear to her that I was not asking for any immediate decisions. Two days later, she called me back and told me she was ready to move with me to the Midwest. I was completely unprepared. Was I ready to move in with Jess? Lamport and Turner (2014) found that strain on relationships that involve Autistics often comes from an inability to cognitively decode each other's messages. This misunderstanding became the greatest conflict in our relationship.

It took a near death experience for me to fully realize that I wanted to move in with Jess. Driving back from our trip touring college campuses, we had a car accident. A large battery component fell off of a gas tanker in front of us and propelled our car into the air as if it was on a ramp. Upon reflection, I realized that if I had died it would have

been with Jess. Although I was happy to be alive, I felt that it would have been a fitting end to my life. When I do eventually die, I would like to be with her. At that moment, I decided I was ready to move in with her.

We made the decision that I would go to the University of Northern Iowa. After living together for a semester, we started talking about marriage, and we decided I would propose over winter break. On December 21, 2017, I proposed to Jess at my parents' house surrounded by our closest family members. We were married on May 26, 2018. During our four years together, we have had our share of miscommunication, and yet, Jess and I understand each other in ways that Neurotypicals do not. As I will expand upon later, Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright (2004) claim that Autistics are unable to experience empathy fully, as they have trouble knowing what others are feeling unless told directly. Although Jess and I do try to be direct with each other, we also have gotten to the point where we frequently anticipate each other's needs. We even finish each other's sentences. This suggests a problem with Baron-Cohen's and Wheelwright's assertion. Using Jess's and my story, this thesis works to understand the relationship between Autism and romance.

Aut is Love, the performance script developed as chapter four in this thesis, began as a smaller class project during my first semester of graduate school. Only a few scenes in, I decided to make this project my thesis. Some of the stories in the script happened years ago, others are more recent. When new experiences arose, such as our wedding, I added it to the script. After the script was complete, the next step was to make decisions regarding casting and directing.

I decided that I wanted to perform as well as direct. As such, I invited one of my friends to come in as an assistant director to offer an outside perspective. I also needed to decide whether to cast only Autistics in the performance. In the Autism community, there is a debate as to whether it is okay for non-Autistics to play Autistics in roles. I hold conflicting views on this subject. A medical model approach views the disability as separate from the person and thus, not a function of marginalization (Mackelprang, 2010). My biggest concern with non-Autistics playing Autistic characters was that it separates the disability and the person. However, given my own role in the show as actor and director, I decided to allow non-Autistics to play Autistic characters. My participation in every aspect of the creative process ensured the performance would highlight Autism as a marginalized identity.

Structure of the Project

I wrote *Aut Is Love* for performance in the University of Northern Iowa Interpreters Theatre on October 11, 12, and 13, 2018. Jess' and my story serves as an example of the possibility of romance and Autism. *Aut Is Love* challenges stereotypes about Autism and romance, explores how Autism affects Jess' and my communication practices, and highlights the role of empathy in Autistic romances. Below I summarize the chapters to follow.

Chapter two reviews current literature regarding the following topic areas: models for understanding disability, as well as Autism and empathy, romantic desire, and relationships. First, I lay out the social model of disability. Next, I present research on

Autism and empathy. Empathy is an important aspect of romantic relationships. I argue current research on Autistics and empathy is limited and problematic. Next, I discuss Autism and romantic desire. Current research demonstrates that society underestimates the extent to which Autistics desire romantic relationships. Following this, I discuss how Autistics pursue relationships. Research suggests that Autistics are more likely to engage in inappropriate relationship-seeking activities. Finally, I discuss how Autistics communicate in relationships. In this section, I discuss relationship fulfillment, as well as, empathy as it occurs for Autistics in relationships with each other.

Chapter three presents the methodological tools used in this thesis. First, I discuss critical performance as a method and how *Aut Is Love* critiques ableist power structures. My next section discusses autoethnography. Next, I discuss the use of the social model of disability and how it was applied to the writing of *Aut Is Love*. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the performance of disability and the performance of Autism in particular.

In chapter four, I present the script for *Aut Is Love*. In line with the purpose of this thesis, I argue in *Aut Is Love* that: *Autistics are capable of romance (and their experiences of romance are diverse), Autism should not be considered a barrier to love, and stories of Autism and romance must be heard.*

Chapter five concludes the thesis with a summary of the main points from each chapter. The first section discusses stereotypes regarding Autistics, in which I both critique and affirm existing stereotypes in relation to my own story. Second, I argue for the adoption of a social model approach to Autism and romance. Autism should not be

perceived as a barrier to romance and Autistics should be seen as having the potential for romantic love. Finally, I discuss how perceptions of Autism and empathy must be expanded, accounting for how Autistics empathize differently with other Autistics. I conclude by discussing the future of research on the topic of Autism and romance.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Being diagnosed with Autism was both liberating and terrifying. The diagnosis offered me an explanation (and blame) for many troubles I faced. At the same time, cultural perceptions of Autism taught me to view disability as something to be pitied at best and shunned at worst. My therapist exposed me to ideas that normalized Autism. She pointed out that some of the greatest thinkers and inventors, such as Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, and Albert Einstein are thought to have fallen somewhere on the Autism spectrum. Providing basic examples of successful Autistics soothed some of my concerns. She also recommended that I watch movies about Autistics, such as the 2005 *Mozart and the Whale*, a romantic comedy about two Autistics. While there were problematic aspects of the movie (such as the fact that all the actors, directors, and writers were Neurotypical), the movie provided me with a model of successful romance between Autistics.

I later learned that my father is Autistic. My parents, like all couples, have their struggles, but they are happily married and have been for about thirty years. At a young age I was exposed to several fictional and non-fictional examples of successful romantic relationships involving Autism. It was not until I started dating that I experienced the stigmas related to disability and romance. In *Aut is Love*, I describe how the grandmother of a girl who I dated dismissed me from being a suitable partner for her granddaughter as soon as she found out I was Autistic. Although that relationship eventually ended, it

lasted a year. After that I was afraid of telling people that I was interested in about my Autism. I eventually got over this fear, but it took several successful dating experiences to realize that having Autism did not make me an incompatible partner. Coming to this understanding required an acceptance of a social model approach to disability, an understanding the role of empathy within relationships, and the establishment of relationships (romantic and platonic) with both Autistics and Neurotypicals.

The Three Models of Disability Discourse

Academia's endeavors to understand disability has branched into three approaches: (1) the moral model, that proposes the idea that a person having a disability is the result of a societal moral failing; (2) the medical model, which suggests that disability is a scientific deficiency, and (3) the social model, which views disability as a positive part of an identity (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017; Mackelprang, 2010; Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2016; Goodely, 2001; Haeghele & Hodge, 2016; Olkin, 2002). Embracing a social model, which I ascribe to, rejects aspects of the latter two models. Thus, I will briefly lay out the moral and medical model.

The moral model of disability views disability as the result of a moral failure (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2016). Those that follow the moral model are inclined to view disability with great shame on a familial and societal level (Olkin, 2002). Mackelprang (2010) states that the moral model has been the primary model used throughout a majority of human history, and, according to Olkin (2002), it is still the dominant model of discourse worldwide. Mackelprang and Salsgiver (2016) explain that during the

Middle Ages, disabilities were seen as a break from the natural order. Many believed that negative events were the results of demonic interference or divine punishment while positive events occurred as a mandate of heaven. One's lack of disability was evidence that God favored them and upheld their perceived superiority over those with disabilities.

Not all religious groups during the Middle Ages viewed the disabled as vessels of the devil. Instead, many viewed disabled people as a test of faith for non-disabled people. This perspective held the belief that sinners had tainted the moral fiber of the world, and the way to please God was through acts of charity (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2016). To test the righteousness of the believer, God sent forth the disabled to be cared for by the nondisabled (Olkin, 2002). While this view treated disabled people with charity and tolerance, it still suggests those without disability are superior. Furthermore, as Mackelprang (2010) argues, the moral model positions the disabled as completely subservient to the kindness of others. The moral model defines the existence of disabled persons in accordance to their relationship with nondisabled people.

The medical model views disability as scientific bad luck (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). According to this model, there is no conscious cause of disability; rather it is merely an abnormality that can be fixed medically (Mackelprang, 2010). Like the moral model, the medical model views the disabled person as "faulty" (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Olkin 2002). However, unlike the moral model, the medical model does not assign fault to society or the individual for the condition (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017). Rather the person with the disability is viewed as the victim of a cruel game of chance (i.e. bad

genetics). Based on this model, doctors, and scientists, rather than members of the clergy, provide expertise on disability (Haegele & Hodge, 2016).

The requirement of the disabled to be both dependent and subservient is still prevalent in the medical model (Mackelprang, 2010). Unlike the moral model, which vilifies the disabled, the medical model generates social sympathy for the unlucky disabled. The medical model encourages societies to provide practical aid for people with disabilities. For this reason, the medical model appeals to many people, including individuals from within the disabled community (Olkin, 2002).

According to Mackelprang (2010), the medical model of disability dominates in the United States today. The medical model attempts to objectively define disability as well as the accommodations required to treat disability (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Thus, much of the research presented in this literature review comes from studies that take a medical model approach. While these studies do enhance our understanding of Autism, they provide a limited perspective. Often, studies from the medical model perspective negate the point of view of Autistic persons, rarely include Autistic researchers, and they do not characterize Autism as a marginalized identity. In other words, the structural aspects that make Autism a disability are not addressed.

The social model of disability understands disability as socially constructed, as well as focusing on the idea that disability is an impairment (Mackelprang, 2010). The social model rejects labeling disabled persons as victims (Goodley, 2001). Dirth and Branscombe (2017) explain that people who follow the social model of disability view the ailments and disadvantages that come from disability as the result of living in an

ableist society. When a disabled person struggles, the blame for those struggles shifts from internal influences to external influences. Goodley (2001) argues that if society removed imagined depictions of the “normal” human, the concept of disability would not exist.

According to the social prospective, objective definitions of disability do not exist because most definitions are generated from a nondisabled populous and because each disability entails diverse and unique experiences. The social model of disability discourse suggests society needs a cure for its discriminatory tendencies (Olkin, 2002). Civil rights for disabled persons constitute the goal of this model, and the leaders of these movements need not be clergy members, doctors, or scientists (Haegele & Hodge, 2016).

The social model views the disabled as having a marginalized identity. This model acknowledges that people with disabilities not only struggle for access but are also looking for acceptance (Goodley, 2001). This principle is apparent in the debate between person first language and identity first language. In an attempt to humanize people with disabilities, the medical model advocates say, “people with disabilities” rather than “the disabled” when discussing disability (Mackelprang, 2010; Goodley, 2001). This language calls attention to the idea that a person is more than their disability. However, in doing so, it also separates the person from their disability. As such, person first language assumes separating a person from their disability is positive and, as such, assumes a negative stance toward disability. The social model, on the other hand, embraces disability as an integral part of one’s identity. From, this perspective, the phrase “a person with

disabilities” requires the qualifier “person” thus implying that to be disabled is to be less human (Goodley, 2001).

A contemporary example of the social model in practice can be seen in a TED talk given by Paralympics athlete, actor, and model Aimee Mullins (2009). Mullins, who is a double amputee, discusses how her collection of prosthetic legs gives her the ability to control her own height. In the talk, she shares a conversation she had with a friend who envied Mullins’s ability to decide of how tall she could be on a daily basis. People with organic legs are relegated to a specific height. This story reveals the social construction of disability. Rather than view her prosthetics as inherently negative, Mullins highlights the advantages of disability. She goes on to share an experience she had with a group of children at an Elementary school. She explains that young children are unique in that they have less preconceived notions about disability. While the teachers at the school urged the children to avoid looking at Mullins’s legs, Mullins encouraged open questions about her amputations. The children viewed Mullins’s legs with excitement and were in awe of her ability to adjust her height whenever she felt like it. To them, her differences made her interesting rather than tragic.

The social model humanizes disability without the need for further qualifiers (Mackelprang, 2010; Goodley, 2001). Following a social model, the goal of *Aut is Love* is to normalize, as opposed to celebrate, relationships that involve Autism. Although my romantic story is a beautiful and special one, I do not want it to become “inspiration porn.” Inspiration porn in relation to disability was defined by Stella Young (2014) in her TED talk as “objectifying disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people” (4:05).

Young argues that a social model approach is about understanding that physical barriers to disabled people are societal issues and not medical ones. My performance uses a social model approach by using person first language, critiquing neuronormativity, and rejecting the notion that disability should be pitied.

Autism and Empathy

Lamport and Turner (2014) lament that the reason that Autistics have trouble with relationships is because we have a difficult time understanding empathy. I adopt Edward Titchener's definition of empathy which is "to project yourself into what you observe" (Baron-Cohen, & Wheelright, 2004 p. 163). Psychologists theorize that Autistics have impaired empathy because they lack a Theory of Mind (Golan & Baron-Cohen, 2006; Mul, Stagg, Herblin, & Aspell, 2018). Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and Firth, (1985) define Theory of Mind as "being able to conceive of mental states: that is, knowing what other people know, want, feel, or believe things" (p. 38).

Theory of Mind is considered a measurable rather than an abstract concept.

Several types of measurements have been applied to Autistics to determine whether they have Theory of Mind.

ToM [Theory of Mind] abilities are commonly assessed using tests that ask respondents to identify the thoughts or feelings of others. Ability to attribute false beliefs to others is a particularly important ToM skill, as is the ability to identify how others are feeling based on situations and/or facial expressions." (Richman & Bidshahri, 2017, p. 46)

As Baron-Cohen and Wheelright (2004) indicated, Autistics have trouble identifying the feelings a person was expressing through nonverbal communication. However, they still

had the desire to give an appropriate response. One problem with this approach is that the studies focus on an Autistic's ability to read the nonverbal communication of Neurotypicals without regard for how they might perceive another Autistic's nonverbal communication. Thus, the false belief experiment is a more objective measure of Theory of Mind.

Baron-Cohen et al. (1985) created a false belief experiment (often referred to as the Sally-Anne experiment) to determine if Autistics could attribute false beliefs. The experiment was conducted with Autistic children and had two other control groups: one of "normal kids" and one of kids with Down Syndrome. Each child was brought into a room with two dolls, two baskets, and one marble. One of the dolls, which the researchers named "Sally," placed a marble into a basket and then left the room. The other doll, which the researchers named "Anne," took the marble from the basket and put it into the box. Sally then re-entered the room. The children were asked where Sally would look for the marble. Due to the fact that Sally was not in the room when the marble was moved, the correct answer was the basket. The researchers ensured that each subject did not have a limited memory so as to clarify that causality was not influenced by memory. In the final results, 23 out of 27 of the Neurotypical answered correctly, 12 out of 14 of the kids with Down's Syndrome answered correctly, but only 4 out of 20 of the Autistic kids answered correctly. Baron-Cohen and his colleagues concluded that Autistics tend to have difficulty taking themselves out of their own experience to acknowledge how an individual could come to a false conclusion.

Applying the results of the false belief experiment to romance would suggest that Autistics have a greater regard for the objective truth than they do for the personal feelings and motivations of those around them (Baron-Cohen & Wheelright, 2004; Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). Given that empathetic impairments often are considered the greatest obstacle to romantic success among Autistics, researchers draw the conclusion that Autistics have trouble dealing with emotions that fall out of their own perception (Lamport & Turner, 2014; Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). Thus, when a romantic partner is going through emotional hardship, it is more difficult for an Autistic to demonstrate support and comfort.

Further studies expanded on the concept of Autism and empathy and theorized that Autistics do feel empathy, at least partially. In fact, research indicates that Autistics care about the emotions of their friends and romantic partners. However, Autistics struggle to glean the specifics of others' emotions, as well as the appropriate response to those emotions. In essence, the Autistics feel cognitive empathy and affective empathy differently, especially with regard to romantic relationships (Baron-Cohen & Wheelright, 2004; Mul, et al., 2018; Koegel, Ashbaugh, Navab, & Koegel, 2016; Holt et al., 2018; Dziobek et al., 2008).

Affective empathy, also known as emotional empathy, represents the desire of a person to respond to another person's emotions in a way that demonstrates care for the wellbeing of said person (Dziobek et al., 2008). Koegel et al. (2016) defines affective empathy as "recognizing what the other is feeling" (p. 922). In romance, a person with a high degree of affective empathy will likely take steps to ensure that if they were to cause

their partner distress, they would feel guilty and desire to rectify the situation (Baron-Cohen & Wheelright, 2004).

Cognitive empathy is the awareness of what the appropriate response is to another person's emotional state (Dziobek et al., 2008). Koegel et al. (2016) defines cognitive empathy as "understanding what the other is saying" (p. 922). A person with a high level of cognitive empathy within a romantic relationship will find it easy to read facial expressions, actions, or other forms of nonverbal communication put forth by their partner (Baron-Cohen & Wheelright, 2004). Cognitive empathy involves a process in which the person is able to both predict the behaviors of others and is knowledgeable about how they can affect the emotions of others (Holt et al., 2018).

With regard to Autism, results of a self-reporting study by Baron-Cohen and Wheelright (2004) determined that Autistics tend to have a high degree of affective empathy but a low degree of cognitive empathy. It should be noted that the results of this study operate under the assumption that the Autistic would be empathizing with a Neurotypical rather than another Autistic. Dziobek et al. (2008) found similar results through what they referred to as a Multifaceted Empathy Test (MET) which consisted of a series of photographs, most of which depict people in emotionally charged situations. With regard to affective empathy, these studies demonstrate that most Autistics do care about how they make other people feel, which implies a willingness to build a romantic relationship based on mutual support. This conclusion challenges the idea that Autistics do not seek relationships due to a lack of desire for connections.

Autism and Romantic Desire

There is a widespread conception that individuals on the Autism Spectrum are not romantic and do not care to look for romance (Dewinter, et al., 2016). Strunz et al. (2017) conducted a study to prove/disprove the accuracy of this assumption. They surveyed 229 adults on the “high functioning” end of the Autism Spectrum. The average age for each person surveyed was around 35 years old. Results demonstrated that 73 percent of the sample had experienced romantic attachment and involvement while only 7 percent of the sample expressed no interest in romance at all. The study concludes that Autistics have the same desire to love and be loved as our Neurotypical counterparts, even though we are often dismissed as asexual or aromantic. Fernandes et al. (2016) reaffirms this and includes that romantic desire is present on all sides of the Autism Spectrum. However, the study did find higher rates of no romantic interest (one third) among individuals on the “lower functioning” end of the spectrum.

While no person or study could fully represent the Autism community, research suggests that the desire for companionship (romantic or otherwise) is present in most Autistics (Baron-Cohen & Wheelright, 2004). Dewinter et al. (2016) found that the sexual desire of Autistics is underestimated, and that view likely derives from parents. They carried out a study that surveyed boys on the Autism Spectrum (ages 15-18) about their sexual experience (unfortunately much of the research around Autism focuses primarily on males). Then the researchers surveyed parents of boys on the Spectrum about what they thought their boy’s sexual experiences were. Results demonstrated that parents vastly underestimated the sexual experience of their offspring. Only 46.5 percent

of parents accurately determined whether or not their boy had ever had an orgasm and 53.5 percent had accurately determined whether or not their boy had ever masturbated. Furthermore, about 69.8 percent accurately determined whether or not their boy had ever experienced intercourse.

According to Dewinter et al. (2016), the societal misconception about the sexuality of people on the Autism Spectrum may be traced back to parents. It is problematic that parents do not have accurate understandings of the sex lives of their children. Corona, Fox, Christodulu, and Worlock (2016) found that open and honest conversations about sexuality between parents and their children provides agency for Autistics to navigate romantic relationships effectively. Thus, if parents are unaware of the romantic desires and activities of their children, they cannot help.

Another reason why open and honest conversations about romance is important is that Autistics have a greater diversity of sexuality when compared to the general public (Dewinter, et al., 2017; May, Pang, & Williams, 2017; Fernandes et al., 2016). May et al. (2017) focused on adolescents that were between the ages 14-15. This study had a limited sample size (n=94), but it did demonstrate a slight difference in rates of bisexuality among men on the spectrum and a significant difference in rates of bisexuality among women on the spectrum. Dewinter et al. (2017) seemed to reaffirm this finding with a study focused on adults. They surveyed 675 adults and adolescents on the Autism Spectrum in the Netherlands (above the age of 15). Participants were asked about their romantic life, sexual orientation, and gender identity. This was then compared to a 2011 control group study of the general population. Once again, those on the Autism spectrum

were more likely to identify as non-heterosexual. There was a slight difference in males and a significant difference with females. In a study of both “high functioning” (n=100) and “low functioning” (n=108) Autistics, Fernandes et al. (2016) found that a higher percent of “low functioning” Autistics expressed sexual interests and also expressed sexual interest in the same sex (nearly a third).

Societal expectations surrounding Autistics and romance set Autistics up for failure in relationships. Dewinter et al. (2017) found that the number of Autistics in a romantic relationship is 20 percent less than the general population. The aromantic perception of Autistics begins with parents; however, it is clear that it continues to manifest itself once Autistics become a mature age (Dewinter et al., 2016). Seeing as how Autistics have been shown to have the same or close to the same level of romantic desire as our Neurotypical counterparts, other factors must contribute to the discrepancy in the number of Autistics that are currently in relationships (Strunz et al., 2017; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). Lamport and Turner (2014) would pose that the difference is in the ability of Autistics to feel empathy, but further research into Autism and relationships paint a fuller picture of the aspects that contribute to this discrepancy.

Autistics Pursuing Relationships

In the pursuit of romantic relationships Autistics have the disadvantage of being viewed as non-romantic (Dewinter et al. 2016). Thus, romantic pursuit functions with the assumption of neuronormative behavior. For example, cognitive empathy is considered desirable within a romantic partner (Lamport & Turner, 2014). However, cognitive

empathy is mistaken for affective empathy, meaning that if a romantic partner does not know what their significant other is feeling there is an assumption that said person does not care what their significant other is feeling. Romantic tropes such as the idea people in love finish each other's sentences, know what is wrong without saying anything, and always gets each other the perfect gift feed narratives about love and romance that exclude a variety of Neurotypes. Such tropes exist because of the neuronormative assumption that Autistics are not even interested in relationships.

Only a small number of Autistics actually experience no romantic desire (Strunz et al., 2017). This fact confronts the preconceived notions society has on the romantic behavior of Autistics, forcing them into a state of collective cognitive dissonance. According to Fernandes et al. (2016), Autistics have a higher likelihood of demonstrating inappropriate sexual behaviors, due to a lack of understanding of what is appropriate. A lack of cognitive awareness coupled with a violation of expectations regarding the romantic nature of Autistics leads to assumptions of bad intentions (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Dewinter et al. 2016; Fernandes et al., 2016).

Stokes et al. (2007) found that when pursuing relationships, Autistics were more likely to pursue their "target" longer. Romantic rejection is often performed with subtlety, which can be difficult for Autistics to understand. Thus, Autistics can be represented as stalkers, even though they simply did not understand they had been rejected. An Autistic tends to be more literal and has trouble understanding the nonverbal undertones in a person's speech, which can result in misunderstandings (Lamport, & Turner, 2014). If a Neurotypical who is not interested in pursuing a relationship is being "polite" by not

issuing a clear rejection of an Autistic's attempts at courtship, Autistics may not know that their advances are unwelcome. Conversely, if a Neurotypical is interested in pursuing a relationship, but is "playing hard to get" by verbally rejecting an Autistic's attempts at courtship, an Autistic may abandon attempts entirely. At best Autistics give up too easily, at worst they take too long to give up.

Fault is difficult to place when it comes to perceptions of Autistics as being stalkers (Fernandes et al., 2016). A Neurotypical may rightly feel uncomfortable by an Autistic's advances and may fear for themselves. A Neurotypical can have legitimate feelings that they are a victim of predatory behavior. However, an Autistic could never have any knowledge that they have made the Neurotypical uncomfortable in anyway (Lamport, & Turner, 2014). Society is going to be more inclined to blame the Autistic for both violation and not understanding social conventions (Stokes et al., 2007). This blame not only creates unfair assumptions on the personal character of the Autistic, but it also discourages us from trying to pursue relationships in the first place.

Autism and Relationships

Dewinter et al. (2017) also studied the frequency of romance in the Autism community and found that 50 percent of those on the Autism Spectrum surveyed were in romantic relationships, compared to 70 percent of the general public. Although a 20 percent difference is significant, the fact that half of Autistics are in relationship is worth noting. Thus, further study and representation is warranted for Autistics in relationships.

According to Lamport and Turner (2014), Autistics have difficulty in relationships (romantic or otherwise) due to lack of empathy. However, as Baron-Cohen and Wheelright (2004) demonstrated, while Autistics have the desire to demonstrate empathy; it is awareness that Autistics lack. Cunningham, Sperry, Brady, Peluso, and Pauletti (2017) carried out a study that demonstrated that the desire to understand their romantic partners might be enough to lead to stronger relationship bonds for Autistics, as long as they are willing to learn. The researchers implemented a modified Relationship Enhancement program tailored towards Autistics to see if social skills and empathy could be maximized. Although there was no significant increase in the overall social skills of those studied, the creation of open and honest communication with and between Autistics increased levels of cognitive empathy.

Autistics are less likely to pick up on subtle hints given by their romantic partners leading their romantic partners to mistake their lack of cognitive empathy for a lack of affective empathy (Stokes et al., 2007; Dziobek et al., 2008; Lamport, & Turner, 2014). However, Strunz's et al. (2017) study challenges the notion of limited cognitive empathy. The individuals surveyed in the study expressed more satisfaction with relationships in which their partner was also on the Autism Spectrum than relationships in which the partner was Neurotypical. Considering that individuals with less cognitive empathy levels in relationships tend to have fewer satisfying relationships, it is logical to infer that Autistics tend to have a higher level of cognitive empathy with other Autistics (Baron-Cohen & Wheelright, 2004; Lamport, & Turner, 2014).

Conclusion

Current research into Autism and romance provides essential context to the argument of this thesis. The social model of communication provides both a framework and a philosophical approach to my project. I discussed the origin of the stereotype that Autistics are not romantic, and I disproved the stereotype with research which indicates that most Autistics do experience romantic desire. I detailed research on Autism and empathy and some problems with how research on this subject has been conducted. For example, much of the research on Autism and empathy has been carried out from a neuronormative perspective. Thus, I argued that Autistics need to be involved in research about Autism.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

As a young Autistic, I did not understand how to adequately express my feelings. Nonverbal communication made little sense to me, so I believed what people said. For example, until I was nearly six years old, I thought movies were real. When I realized that movies were fictional and people on the screen were, in fact, acting, it opened up a new world for me. The concept of acting taught me that people could alter who they were in different situations. Through theatre, I learned how to act, and I learned how nonverbal communication was interpreted and understood by others. In essence, I learned how to perform Neurotypicality.

I applied my acting skills to everyday life and became so skilled at performing Neurotypicality, people began to question my diagnosis as well as the necessity of my accommodations. Although my acting skills have provided me with the advantages of passing as Neurotypical, I must constantly decide when to *be* Autistic and when to *act* Neurotypical. For example, as I sit in class, my Neurotypical performing self thinks, “Nathan, sit still and look the teacher in the eyes.” Meanwhile my Autistic self wants to bounce my leg up and down, move around in the chair, or shake my head. My decision to do either is often a negotiation between doing what is comfortable and doing what people expect. Thus, either choice is arguably a performance. I am using Schechner’s (2002) definition of performance, which he defines as consciously repeated and rehearsed actions.

This thesis challenges how romance and Autism are viewed in society using critical performance autoethnography. Through writing, directing, and performing *Aut Is Love*, I examine my own romantic experiences and how Autism has affected my relationships. This chapter discusses critical performance, autoethnography, the social model as a method, the performance of disability, and the performance of Autism.

Critical Performance

Critical performance is described by Pineau (2002) as “a means to understand and reform the institutions that discipline our minds and bodies” (p. 41). In this particular case, I seek to reform a society that disciplines the minds and bodies of Autistics. The Autistic mind is viewed as aromantic, and the Autistic body is viewed as asexual. In her writing on critical performative pedagogy, Pineau (2002) describes how academia can exist as an institution to critique institutional limitations on our bodies or perpetuate them. Performance is a demonstration of repetition, in movements, words, ideas, and themes (Madison & Hamera, 2006). In *Aut is Love*, I present my story as a classic love story. In doing so, I repeat common tropes found in romantic comedies, such as the first time a couple says, “I love you,” the process of making the relationship official, and a marriage proposal. However, the script still challenges traditional love stories with the presence of Autism. For example, after the “I love you” scene, the narrator character describes love as a chemical reaction rather than destined perfection. My intention is to both normalize Autistic romance by demonstrating similarities and celebrate Autistic

romance by demonstrating differences. However, this celebration is one by Autistics for Autistics, rather than by Autistics for Neurotypicals.

Performance is an object of study, method of study, and a way of presenting information. For example, performance can be simply one-on-one conversations, they can be theatrical productions, and they can be oral interpretations of literature (Taft-Kaufman, 1985). Performance shapes our day to day activities, who we are, and what motivations we have as we navigate through life; thus, furthering our understanding of performance helps us understand the socially constructed world around us.

Schechner (2002) states that performances “are made of ‘twice behaved behaviors,’ ‘restored behaviors,’ performed actions that people train to do, that they practice and rehearse” (p. 29). Even when an action is repeated, the specific circumstances in which the action is repeated have been altered. The simplest example of this is theatrical production. A script is given. Lines are memorized and delivered. The actor is directed to use different deliberative methods for each line to demonstrate meaning that goes beyond the words of the script. Sometimes these directives are provided by stage directions and sometimes they are provided by the preferences of the director. Either way, it is up to the actor to convey the meaning through their performance. This template can be used in a wide array of human symbolic interactions (Schechner, 2002). For example, the simple act of saying “Hi, how are you” to another person creates meaning through situation and motivation. The words “Hi how are you” are often spoken several times a day. If I say it to a stranger, my motivation is not to obtain an actual answer, it is to establish myself as a caring person. If I am saying it to an

acquaintance, I am still not seeking a truthful answer; rather, I am communicating to them that I remember them from previous interactions, and my motivation is to establish a rapport for future interactions. If I am talking to a close friend, I may be seeking a truthful answer. All of these situations involve the same script, but each time the lines are delivered, there is a different motivation.

In the case of *Aut Is Love*, the text that I had to work from was my own romantic life with Jess. Even with my auditory Autistic memory, I knew that trying to record everything word for word would be futile. That text was three years of experience I needed to condense into a one-hour script. Everything that I did remember word for word, I recorded. When there was a gap in my memory, I took creative liberty to fill in the gaps while attempting to create accurate meaning behind the lines. A few times, Jess and I disagreed on specific interactions. For example, there is a line in my script in which Jess says, “I find that if you just look at peoples’ noses, they will never know that you aren’t actually looking them in the eye.” According to Jess, she actually said forehead instead of nose. I decided to go with the way I remembered it because this story is told from my point of view. Furthermore, I was inspired by the methodology of oral interpretation of literature in the way that I directed the actor to play a past version of myself (Bowman, 1996). While I did work with him on understanding my mannerisms, posture, and overall vocal style, I wanted his role to be his own. As the director, I granted my actor creative freedom in how he would deliver lines. I wanted him to interpret me, not impersonate me. This allowed for a greater level of self-reflection on my part as I saw

my actor creating a version of me based on just the words I gave him. It introspectively gave me insight into how others view me.

Performance goes beyond the stage to help us understand how we play roles in everyday life. For example, we might understand gender as a performance. In the case of gender, cultural norms surround masculinity and femininity, and provide men and women with scripts for how to talk and move (Schechner, 2002). Performing masculinity might involve making bold and aggressive statements in a way that demonstrates certainty and domination. The performance of femininity, on the other hand, might be characterized by delivering lines in a soft-spoken and open-ended way that encourages discussion and cooperation. Repetitions of scripts, stage directions, and lines serve to preserve existing power structures through the constant rehearsal of words and activities (Schechner, 2002). Using this metaphor, Autistics are often unaware of social scripts before navigating public space. For example, I struggled with expectations around the performance of masculinity. In many ways, being Autistic is like being cast in a play in which everyone has their lines memorized except you. The actor's nightmare. Turning my experiences into a script helped me understand which aspects of the social script I was adhering to and which aspects I was breaking.

Another example of the reinforcement of power structures can be seen through my own work writing this thesis. Langellier and Bell (2010) argue that writing is inherently performative. Every word and sentence in this paper has been used in one context or another throughout the course of human history. And yet, no paper exists that is identical to the one you are reading now. Through writing this thesis, I am utilizing a

script to perform the role of student. As a grad student I am required to write a thesis or research paper, and there is a deadline for when to turn it in. The way that I perform my role is by making sure that it is done correctly. Furthermore, I have made the performative choice in this paper to use direct first-person language because I prefer to have these words that I am writing right now be directly associated with me. Some people prefer to use passive language such as “one might say” or “one could conclude,” which performatively creates the perception of being detached from the work. Therefore, even writing can be performative, as deeper meaning is hidden beyond the text (Langellier & Bell, 2010)

Autoethnography

Ethnographic research involves studying the societal “other” (Conquergood, 1985; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). In the case of this project, the “other” is the Autistic community. The fact that I am presenting Autism as a social group means that I am using the social model of disability discourse as presented by Mackelprang (2010) as both a part of my heuristic vocabulary for analysis of my play and as part of my methodology.

My insider status as an Autistic, combined with a focus on autobiographical experiences, makes this project autoethnographic in nature. Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (p. xix). As the writer, director, and an actor in *Aut Is Love*, I connect my personal story with cultural

understandings of romance and Autism. This connection of the self to the societal invites an in-depth description of my experience as an Autistic (Ellis et al., 2011).

Each step of the creative process has been coproduced. My wife, whose story is woven into my own, my advisor, who provides feedback on drafts, my assistant director, and my cast, who embody my writing—all offer unique perspectives and feedback that shift and shape my understandings, as well as how I tell my story through performance. Ellis et al. (2011) explains how this co-production impacts relational analysis. I compare my own experience to those with whom I experienced it. For example, I consulted with my wife Jess, (the love interest in the play) regarding several of the scenes. On more than one occasion we had slight differences in how we remembered events. Most of the time I decided to write the scenes the way I remembered them because the play was based on my point of view. Jess' position relative to mine is not necessarily a falsehood, but rather a relational difference from somebody who happened to perceive the same event from a different perspective. While I did not alter my script based on contradictions in Jess' memory, her input did cause me to rethink several experiences. Because of this, my perspective of a story that I thought I knew shifted and broadened. Ellis et al. (2011) explain that differing perspectives on an event may be seen as a limitation of autoethnographic research, and they encourage autoethnographers to coproduce their stories with others.

Conquergood (1985) warns of four mistakes when performing ethnography: the custodian's rip-off, the enthusiast's infatuation, the skeptic's cop-out, and the curator's exhibitionism. The custodian's rip-off focuses on identification (or attraction to the

Other) and the research employs a high level of detachment from the people they are portraying, which is problematic as it does not create an accurate portrayal of the Other. The enthusiast's infatuation has a high focus on identity and high level of commitment to the people the performer is portraying, which is problematic as it ignores the practical differences that make the Other unique. The skeptic's cop-out has a high focus on difference and high level of detachment from the people the performer is portraying, which is problematic as it demonstrates a lack of desire to understand the Other. Finally, the curator's exhibitionism has a high focus on difference and a high level of commitment to the people the performer is portraying, which is problematic as it objectifies the Other's culture.

Conquergood (1985) argues that only by balancing identity, difference, detachment, and commitment, can we have a dialogical performance. Conquergood (1985) offers dialogical performance as a way to ethically perform the Other through the enactment of dialogue between self, Other, and culture. Dialogical performance is created through mutual understanding and the communication of the human experience. Unlike dialogue, which is the act of people talking, dialogical performance is the act of people talking with the intention of understanding the other. Dialogical performance in a staged performance, such as *Aut Is Love*, positions the performance as not only *about* the self, Other, and culture but hopes to communicate *with* self, Other, and culture.

The directing process prompted new insights into my experiences and was also a coproduction. My assistant director, a close friend to my wife and I, offered an outsider's perspective of our relationship. In rehearsals, we would engage in conversation to create

a picture reflective of my experience that also competently communicated our message to our audience of, presumably, mostly Neurotypicals. This was done to maintain Conquergood's (1985) standards of ethical performance by balancing identity, difference, detachment, and commitment. My goal was to use the dialogue between myself and my assistant director would create a dialogical performance.

The conversation between the audience and myself happened in both a figurative sense during the play itself and in a more literal way during a question and answer session after the performance. Pelias and VanOosting (1987) explain dialogic performance as a way to create a two-way conversation about an ethnic group. To engage in dialogic performance, a researcher must immerse one's self into a culture with an openness to what another has to offer. If a performance about an ethnic group is detached or done solely for the benefit of the performer/researcher they have committed the curator's exhibition mistake (Conquergood, 1985). Luckily, I am permanently attached to the group that I performed so this conversation took place through myself and the audience. In writing and directing the portrayal and writing of Jess' character, I used our long and preestablished relationship to involve her in the conversation with my audience. This performance simultaneously invites Neurotypicals to identify with me, while also emphasizing the diversity of experiences between Autistics.

During the play, the audience would contribute to the conversation through audience reaction, such as laughter during funny moments and sighs during romantic moments. Conquergood (1985) explains that there is always a fear of objectifying a cultural subgroup that can sometimes result in a fear of engaging with the performance of

a subgroup. In my case, there was an underlying fear that the audience would laugh at my Autism rather than with me about my Autism. To address this, I created two Nathans: a present version of myself who narrated the story and a Nathan who enacted scenes that occurred in the past. I cast myself as the narrator, which allowed me to literally laugh at myself and gave the audience permission to laugh with me.

The Social Model of Disability as Method

Utilizing ethnography as a means of understanding Autism is an acknowledgement that Autistics are a social group rather than a medical group. Ellis et al.'s (2011) classification of disability as being an "Other" echoes Mackelprang's (2010) approach to disability as a function of societal injustice. When the disability is acknowledged as part of one's identity, it allows those in the disabled community to create and claim culture, lore, and ritual within the disabled community. The practice of studying Autism through ethnography legitimizes Autism as a social subgroup. For example, using this model, an access barrier such as a building without a ramp for a person with a wheelchair as a symptom of oppression and not disease (Goodley, 2001). Applied to Autism, a sensory unfriendly environment for a person on the Autism spectrum is viewed as a symptom of oppression (Goodley, 2001).

The social model of disability promotes advocacy and has practical benefits. Advocates for the social model address the limitations of medical model-based legislation and end up providing stronger support for the progression of disability rights in general. Dirth and Branscombe (2017) carried out a study that analyzed the relationship between

policy support and model endorsement focusing mainly on medical and social. They determined the level of support for each model (specifically medical or social) based on a Likert score applied to questions pertaining to the extent that people viewed societal stigma as being the primary problem with disability. Findings demonstrated that people who endorsed a medical model of disability were more likely to blame the struggles of people with disabilities on internal factors related to the disability itself.

Inspired by such studies, *Aut Is Love* focuses on external factors that make situations difficult for Autistics. Studies showed non-disabled people were more likely to endorse the legitimization of disability as being an intrinsic inequality, which ultimately led them to be less supportive of policy initiatives to promote equality. Conversely, findings demonstrated that people that endorsed a social model of disability were more likely to blame the struggles of people with disabilities on external factors related to society's view of disability, leading them to refute the legitimization of disability as being an intrinsic inequality, which further led them to be more supportive of expanding disability rights through public policy (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017). Using the social model as a guide, *Aut Is Love* seeks to legitimize Autism as a marginalized identity rather than a medical condition.

Performance of Disability

In the play, the role of Nathan is bifurcated and involved me playing myself (a disabled person playing a disabled person) and another actor playing a past version of myself (a non-disabled person playing a disabled person). In a practical sense, the

creation and portrayal of the roles required an understanding of the performance of disability. By performance of disability, I am refereeing to three separate circumstances: theatrical/cinematic performance of a disabled person by a non-disabled person, theatrical/cinematic performance of a disabled person by a disabled person, and the ways in which everyday interactions are performative (Howe, 2010; Kuppers 2007). When I refer to the performance of disability, I am not making the argument that disability is fake or that it has entertainment value. Rather, I am referring to the bodies of literature that discuss the way people present disability to the world through portrayals by both disabled and non-disabled people both on and off the stage.

Much of the current literature on the method of performing disability as a non-disabled person is primarily focused on physical disabilities, as physical disabilities often require tools such as wheelchairs. Kuppers (2007) proposed that in cinema, the playing of a disabled person by a nondisabled person is given high praise through academy awards and reviews. Actors are praised for being able to utilize the cumbersome tools that help them portray disability. For example, to an able-bodied person a wheelchair is an obstacle. The actor is bound by the limitations of the wheelchair as they develop their character. However, to a person with a physical disability, a wheelchair allows for mobility. To the disabled, the wheelchair is agency; to the non-disabled, it is a barrier (Kuppers, 2007).

In my own experience as a disabled person, I am often told that my service dog seems like a barrier. Indeed, there are some things that I cannot do with my service dog due to her presence. For example, my service dog cannot walk on escalators. In fact, on

more than one occasion I have had to pick up my service dog to ride an escalator because there were no stairs or elevators in the vicinity. People watching assume that the dog was burdensome or a barrier. However, the dog is the reason why I am mentally able to be out in public in the first place.

From a social model approach there are several problematic aspects of a non-disabled person playing a disabled person. The social model views the disability as a part of an identity rather than as something that the person has or caught (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017; Mackelprang, 2010; Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2016; Goodely, 2001; Haeghele & Hodge, 2016; Olkin, 2002). Thus, performing disability cannot only involve the performance of the struggles associated with the disability on a medical level. The performance must also present an understanding of the social stigma people with disabilities face. Representations of disability on stage require more than an actor sitting in a wheelchair pretending their legs do not work. A staged performance of disability should also include how disabled people have encountered dehumanizing treatment by those around them (Kuppers, 2007; Mackelprang, 2010).

When a disabled person is performing a character with their same disability there is a shared experience (Kuppers, 2007). The disability is no longer a part of someone that the performers needs to take on; it is a collection of experiences that they can utilize to relate to their character (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2016; Kuppers, 2007). In my case, it was easy to relate to my character because I was playing myself. Thus, when looking at the areas of focus for studying the performance of disability, my performance was a

melding of theatrical/cinematic performance of a disabled person by a disabled person, and how everyday interactions with others is performative.

Everyday interaction and the manner in which a person presents themselves to the world is a part of the performance of disability. Howe (2010) points to the example of a one-handed pianist named Paul Wittgenstein. Pianos and songs for the piano are designed based on the assumption that the person who plays will have two hands. As such, a one-handed individual is at an inherent disadvantage, thus further characterizing a medical model approach to disability (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2016). To be successful at the piano, Wittgenstein had to play the piano in a way that concealed to people that he only had one hand. Thus, he had to perform two-handedness to be considered successful. The performance of disability in everyday life often involves the performance of normalcy. While I was on stage, I had to perform normalcy in a number of ways. I wore formal clothing to demonstrate professionalism and I made eye contact with my audience to perform Neurotypicality.

There are also ways in which disabled people exemplify their disability in the way they act. For example, I have the physical ability to look people in the eyes. However, I often choose not to because it makes me uncomfortable due to my disability. The choice to make eye contact is done when I am around people who are less likely to be forgiving by a lack of social appropriateness. Thus, the decision to not look people in the eyes is me allowing myself to be Autistic (Howe, 2010; Kupperts 2007).

While portraying myself in this play, I performed both Neurotypicality and Autism. This methodological choice allowed me to establish a rapport with my

Neurotypical audience members. Throughout the performance I maintain eye contact with the audience even though the natural inclination of many Autistics is to avoid eye contact. I also have several moments in which my narrator character's self-reflection of my past self is based on a Neurotypical critique. For example, I make fun of my past self's inability to complete tasks such as ordering a pizza; a task that comes naturally for many Neurotypicals. There are also several instances throughout the play where my past self tries and fails to portray Neurotypicality. In the narrative, before my past self learns that his love interest (Jess) is also on the Autism spectrum, he attempts to use subtility.

The play also involves several specific instances in which both my past and present selves portray action that was written to perform Autism. For example, there are several places in which my present self cheers on my past self with a "nailed it" interjection. The "nailed it" lines are spoken during times where my past character has made a social error and my narrator character does not understand it. As the author I know that a social error was made, but as the performer, I allow my ignorance with regard to social interactions to become a part of my performance.

Performance of Autism

To understand the performance of Autism we must first understand the performance of Neurotypicality. As an Autistic, I frequently perform Neurotypicality for the purpose of accommodation. Neurotypicals receive different messages from different actions than I do. Thus, I need to figure out what I want to communicate and how I want to communicate it. For example, our communicative interactions that are intended to

briefly acknowledge other people's presence (also known as small talk) are simply people acting out a script that society has written for them (Schechner, 2002). Take for example this common interaction: Person One says, "Hello, how are you?" Person Two responds, "I'm good, what about you?" Person One responds, "I'm good, thank you." When you break it down, most of the time Person One does not actually care how Person Two is doing, or at least not to the point to which their answer will affect the rest of their day. Furthermore, due to social standards that tell us not to burden others with our own misery, even if Person Two is having a bad day they will likely not respond truthfully. If Person One does not care about the answer and Person Two is not going to be truthful, then on a practical level this interaction does not make sense. Autistics like me often have trouble with the engagement of small talk. For me to properly perform Neurotypicality I need to look at the next performative level, which is representing something with something else.

The meaning of the above conversation is not conveyed through the text itself. Such an interaction can convey that the two people involved in this interaction are on positive speaking terms, or that they enjoy each other's company outside of small talk. That message is conveyed through the subtext of the words. Similarly, an actor in a theatrical production is given a line and told by the director that they need to use the words in the script to establish to the audience that there is a good relationship between the two individuals that are interacting. The conversation could also demonstrate that Person Two is not doing well but does not want to talk about it, or that they are not doing well, they want to talk about it, but they do not want to impose upon Person One. Finding

the correct method of delivering a line to competently convey our intended message is a major aspect of performance. Using this analogy, Neartypicals have this script naturally memorized, while Autistics often do not even know that there is a script.

Of the actors, I was the only one that is on the spectrum. The actor that played a past version of myself spent a lot of time conversing with me my background, my ideology, my struggles, and my mannerisms. This process worked to “bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs” (Conquergood, 1985, p 9). Dialogic performance goes both ways (Conquergood, 1985). As such, I made sure that I understood the experiences of my actor and together we came up with ways of using his experiences to perform my own experiences.

While Kuppers (2007) makes the argument that non-disabled people playing disabled people can be problematic because the non-disabled person is neither bound by the same limitations or privy to the same experiences as the disabled person, a social model approach can still take place as long as the condition is portrayed as a part of the character (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017; Mackelprang, 2010; Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2016; Goodely, 2001; Haeghele & Hodge, 2016; Olkin, 2002). While I was working with the actor that was playing the past version of myself, I made sure to direct him based on how Autism affects me, rather than how Autism affects Autistics in general. Thus, I was not showing him how to portray Autism; rather, I was showing him how to portray me. Autism is a part of who I am, but when my actor’s character made the creative decision to not look a person in the eyes, he did it because it is how I am, not how Autistics are.

Conclusion

Aut Is Love uses autoethnographic, critical performance to demonstrate a social model of the performance of Autism. This chapter has laid out the methods I utilized for my performance, and the methods that I utilized to develop my understanding of self. During the process, I learned that performance studies is more than figuring out how to create the most entertaining and effective performance, it is a method for constructing knowledge.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS/SCRIPT

Aut Is Love was performed in the University of Northern Iowa Interpreter's Theatre on October 11, 12, and 13 2018. There were four actors involved in the play as well as several crew members involved with assistant directing, stage-managing, set construction, lighting, cueing, and audio.

Aut Is Love
By Nathan Selove

Cast:

Present Nathan: Nathan Selove

Nathan: Austen Carahan

Jess: Erin Hassenstab

Woman: Tim Matheson

Announcer: Tim Matheson

Roommate: Tim Matheson

Cashier: Tim Matheson

Trucker: Tim Matheson

Dad: Tim Matheson

Troll: Tim Matheson

Crew:

Artistic Director: Danielle Dick McGeough, Ph.D.

Designer and Technical Director: Paul J. Siddens III, Ph.D.

Production Coordinator: Amandajean Freking Nolte, M.A.

Emerita Artistic Director: Karen S. Mitchell, Ph.D.

Playwright/Director: Nathan Selove

Assistant Director: Kyle Chaska

Stage Manager: Claire Kaufman

Lighting Operator: Claire Kaufman

Audio/Projections Operator: Desiree Allen

Master Carpenter: James Keane

Scenery Construction and Paint Crew: Claire Kaufman, Grace Mertz, Nathan Selove,

Matthew Gruemmer

Costume Designer/ Properties Crew Chief: Philippa Siddens

Costume and Properties Crew: Scott Bredman

Electronic Engineer: Michael Rueber

Graduate Production Assistants: Matt Gruemmer, James Keane, Grace Mertz

Graphic Design: CHAS PR

Photographer: UNI University Relations

Emerita Founder: Phyllis Scott Carlin, Ph.D.

Head, Department of Communication Studies: Paul J. Siddens III, Ph.D.

Dean, College of Humanities, Arts and Sciences: John Fritch, Ph.D.

Props:

Corn hole full set of beanbags

2 phones

Deck of cards

Microphone

Couch

Set:

Couch

Corn hole Board

Kitchen Chairs

Car Setup

Car Table

Scene 1:*(Abstract clear stage)**Scene: Lights come on. Present Nathan runs out on stage and trips on his way to the center. He quickly gets up and continues to the middle of the stage.*

Present Nathan. You're never supposed to start shows by telling everyone that you aren't good at starting shows, so I'm not going to say it, and hope nobody notices. My name is Nathan Selove, and I'm an Autistic studying communication. I know; I have a disability that affects my ability to communicate, so I had the brilliant idea to major in communication. There's always a mix of assumptions and, sometimes, even feelings of pity that come out when I tell people that I'm Autistic. One woman I told practically started crying.

Woman. *(Entering and crying.)* I am so sorry.

Present Nathan. You should be. It's all your fault.

(WOMAN Exits.)

Present Nathan. Another common assumption is that we aren't romantic. My mother is a sex therapist, and one of her specialties is studying the sexuality of people on the autism spectrum. *(Aside.)* Yeah, some parents have a candy bowl in their kitchen, others have a cookie jar. Mine had a condom basket. One time she was talking to a colleague about her area of specialty and he asked her,

Therapist. *(Entering.)* Why would you study that? Autistics don't have sex.

Present Nathan. Yes, we do; just trust me on this one.

(THERAPIST Exits.)

Present Nathan. Autism is ninety percent genetic. So, if we don't have sex, then where the hell do we come from? And if talking about disabled sex makes you uncomfortable, let me just say that I have tried sex with non-Autistics, and I'm not impressed. You're always talking during sex! To God, to daddy, hell one time I had a partner yell out the name of her cat; it was a very delineative name. It is true that Autistics are more likely to be asexual than the general population, but the number is still pretty low. Being autistic and trying to operate in a romantic world constructed by Neurotypicals is hard. For those of you that don't know what that means, the term Neurotypical means you don't have any special powers when it comes to the way you think—it's the Autistic community's equivalent of saying you're a muggle.

I have had more romances and I have had more romantic attachments than I am proud of, but I have also learned how to date Neurotypicals. And, as luck would have it, I met someone.

(Location: A front yard)

(JESS and NATHAN Enter. They start setting up a game of corn hole.)

Present Nathan. I was really happy when I first met her. I had just been rejected by a girl I had a bit of a crush on. Upset, I decided to stop pursuing a relationship. My brother invited me to a yard party that his friend was hosting. I figured, why not? Jess was a roommate that lived at the house. Like many millennial love stories, this one starts with one of the most intimate questions a person can ask.

Nathan. Does anyone have a phone charger I could borrow?

Jess. Yeah, mine is plugged into the wall over there. Go for it.

Nathan. Thanks. *(Plugs his phone in.)* I'm Nathan by the way.

Jess. Jess. *(They shake hands.)*

Present Nathan. And the moment I saw her, I knew that I wanted to know her political views to see how compatible we were. My brother's friend asked the crowd if anyone wanted to play corn hole.

(JESS and NATHAN set up to start playing corn hole.)

Present Nathan. She said she wanted to play so I figured, now's my chance. All I had to do was start a conversation and not say anything nerdy.

Nathan. Do you like Buffy the Vampire Slayer?

Present Nathan. Nailed it.

Jess. *(Excited.)* Oh my god, I love that show!

Nathan. Right? So, whom is your favorite character?

Jess. Who.

Nathan. *(Thinks for a second.)* You're right, who.

Jess. Oh, I am Anya!

Nathan. I relate to her so much. Of course, that could be because I'm Autistic.

Jess. Oh, cool.

Nathan. I've also been told I am a mix between Xander and Spike. But my favorite character would have to be Willow.

Jess. Willow is such a fun person. Joss Whedon is a lovely human being!

Nathan. Yes, a gentleman with a firm feminist philosophy.

Jess. *(Laughs.)* I love alliteration.

Nathan. *(Confidently.)* Oh, I have an apt attitude towards alliteration. Appealing?

Present Nathan. Awkward. And that is not just cheesy dialogue; we actually said that to each other.

(NATHAN and JESS react to JESS' teammate on the other side getting a score.)

Nathan. Damnit!

Jess. *(Simultaneously.)* Yes! Good job!

Nathan. So, out of curiosity, are you together?

Jess. Oh, no.

Nathan. I just wanted to make sure that I'm not pissing anyone off if I flirt with you.

Jess. *(Oblivious.)* No, I'm not with anyone.

(Change in location: Corner to talk)

Present Nathan. We ended up talking for hours. Even after the game ended we just found a corner and talked about TV shows, feminism, social justice, books, family, and autism. I felt a connection. At the time, I wasn't sure if it was a romantic one but I certainly did want to get to know her better. We started texting and hanging out and the more I got to know her, the more I realized that I had finally found a Neurotypical that understood me.

Scene 2:

(Abstract Clear Stage)

Jess. I sometimes feel like a little bit like an outsider, I didn't have a lot of friends in school.

Present Nathan. A Neurotypical that I have so much in common with.

Jess. I grew up watching animals get butchered. The process always fascinated me.

Present Nathan. She is socially awkward.

Jess. The excitement of others sometimes makes me depressed.

Present Nathan. She feels like it's her duty to make inappropriate jokes.

Jess. *(Laughs a bit.)* He said duty.

Present Nathan. She gets over-stimulated easily.

Jess. Oh my God! Turn the volume down! *(Pause.)* Really 85? Were you just turning it up while I wasn't paying attention?

Present Nathan. She is obsessive.

Jess. My new hobby for the day: calling Senator Grassley's office every fifteen minutes, as four of the contact offices cannot accept messages. The mailbox is too full. Seems like it might be a problem if a representative cannot hear messages from his constituents!

Present Nathan. She is direct.

Jess. Hello Senator Grassley's office? Hi, I'm calling in regard to the Senator's decision to vote for the GOP tax plan. Would you like to tell me what the fuck he was thinking?

Present Nathan. She has the same issues with eye contact.

Jess. I find that if you just look at peoples' noses they will never know that you aren't actually looking them in the eye. *(She exits.)*

Nathan. *(Looks at the audience.)* Oh shit, she's an Autistic. *(He exits.)*

Scene 3:

(Change in location Phone call)

Present Nathan. Now statistically, two Autistics being in a relationship together tend to have stronger bonds than mixed couples, but I met Jess right after I had learned how to date Neurotypicals. You see I had learned subtly and now I had to completely unlearn it. We started texting nonstop. It was a continuous conversation that went for days, and then weeks. We talked on the phone, and it wasn't awful.

(NATHAN enters.)

Present Nathan. To put it into perspective this is me talking on the phone normally.

Nathan. Hi is this Papa Johns? Ummm, I mean Dominos? I mean, what is it? Yes, I called. Right, Pizza Hut. Okay, good. Yes. So. Umm. Yes. Umm. I'd like a Pizza. Yes, a Pizza. Pick-up, I mean delivery! I mean, which one is the one where you bring it? Delivery, right. Haha. Because the name is delivery. I'd like a large. How big is the large? Okay, then I want a medium. Yes. Umm. So, pepperoni. You have pepperoni, right? Of course, you're a pizza place and all. And that's it. Wait! No, can I get sausage as well...

(JESS enters.)

(Change in location to phone call, Jess is on the couch and Nathan is pacing)

Present Nathan. And here was me talking to Jess.

Nathan. My parents used to have a goat.

Jess. I love goats! They are so cute!

Nathan. Yes, his name was Bert. He used to run at me and try to ram me when I was in his pen but one day he tried, and I just punched him in the face. And he never tried to do it again. I loved that goat.

Jess. When I have my own house, I am defiantly going to have goats. Why was his name Bert?

Nathan. Because his brother's name was horny.

Jess. Oh, that's great! Where is his brother.

Nathan. We ate him.

Jess. Oh, cool what do goats taste like?

Nathan. Kind of like lamb.

Jess. I love lamb!

Nathan. Lamb is delicious.

Jess. I always wanted to raise goats to make goat milk.

Nathan. I actually had this ice cream bar that was made with goat milk and blackberries.

Jess. I wish I could still eat ice cream.

Present Nathan. Due to health reasons she can't really eat carbs.

Nathan. It's a shame. Otherwise I would ask you if you would like to get ice cream with me sometime.

Jess. I like trees. A lot. Maybe we could go to the arboretum sometime.

Nathan. I'm free this Saturday.

Jess. I could pick you up at noon.

Nathan. Alright sounds good!

Jess. Well I need to go but I'll see you on Saturday.

Nathan. Alright bye!

Jess. Bye.

(Both hang up.)

Jess and Nathan. Wait so is this a date?

(Both exit.)

Present Nathan. We had been talking nonstop for the last three weeks and we had never established whether it was romantic or friendly. But the nice thing about it was that it really didn't matter at first. Jess was my friend and I liked talking to her outside of anything commitment related.

Scene 4

(Change in location to Arboretum)

(NATHAN and JESS enter. They walk around the stage silently talking to each other.)

Present Nathan. And that is how our outing to the arboretum worked. We just talked. We never touched. We never held hands. We didn't even hug until we said goodbye. We just talked. We spent three hours walking around the arboretum talking about our love for dogs, our hate for sports, our passion for social justice. Then we went to Chipotle and spent another two hours talking about our hopes, our dreams, our desires.

(JESS and NATHAN get into the car.)

(Change in location to car)

Present Nathan. We didn't really establish what it was until our ride back.

Nathan. Thanks for driving. I really enjoyed this.

Jess. Yeah me too. You're really easy to talk to.

Nathan. Yeah, I have that affect on people.

Jess. Effect.

Nathan. Really? I never understood when to use which.

Jess. Effect is a noun. Affect is a verb.

Nathan. Huh, that makes sense.

Jess. Do normal people correct each other's grammar?

Nathan. I don't know. I see it as a game.

Present Nathan. At this point I really wanted to figure out if it was a date. So, I tried to come up with the subtlest way possible to clarify it.

Nathan. Did you notice that I was flirting with you when we first met?

Present Nathan. Nailed it.

Jess. No, I didn't.

Nathan. I literally told you that I was.

Jess. Figuratively?

Nathan. No literally. I said, “I just wanted to make sure that I’m not pissing anyone off if I flirt with you.”

Jess. Oh, that was flirting?

Nathan. Yes.

Jess. I don’t usually notice that. I’m not really used to people flirting with me.

Nathan. Really? But you’re like cool and pretty and stuff.

Jess. Thanks.

Nathan. Did you notice me flirting with you today?

Jess. Yes, I did.

Nathan. Does that mean that this was a date?

Jess. I don’t know. Does it?

Nathan. If you want it to be.

Jess. What does that mean?

Nathan. Well I’m not ready to make any official commitments. I have had a lot of bad experiences dating. But I am fond of you and I want to get to know you more. So, I think it means that we continue texting and go on some more dates and if it goes well after a while, I ask you out and we become official on Facebook. Does that sound okay?

Jess. Yeah. I think that sounds great.

Nathan. Sweet!

Jess. I mean this is the best date I have ever been on.

Nathan. Really?

Jess. Well you didn’t stand me up so yes.

Nathan. You’ve never been on a real date before?

Jess. Not really.

Nathan. I'm sorry. I hope I gave you a good experience.

Jess. You did. Don't worry.

(They get out of the car and walk up to each other.)

Nathan. Well I'll text you.

Jess. I'm looking forward to it.

Nathan. May I hug you?

Jess. Yes.

(They hug and then they exit.)

Scene 5

(Change in location to living room)

Present Nathan. We spent the next month continuing to go on dates. We texted constantly, and we called each other every day. I had not asked the sacred question yet. I knew she would say yes when I did but I wanted to make it special.

(Light shines on a table. NATHAN and JESS are sitting on opposite sides. There is a deck of cards on the table.)

Nathan. Hey so I'm working on a magic trick and I was wondering if I could test it on you?

Jess. You do magic?

Nathan. Yeah! They don't call me Merlin for nothing.

Jess. *(Confused.)* People call you Merlin?

Nathan. No, but if they did it wouldn't be for nothing. *(Picks up the deck of cards.)*

Jess. Is this one of those "is this your card" tricks?

Nathan. *(Smirks a bit.)* Kind of. *(He holds the deck in from of him.)* Pick a card. *(JESS picks a card.)* Memorize it.

Jess. Okay, it's memorized.

Present Nathan. Six-of-Hearts.

Nathan. Now put it at the bottom of the deck.

Jess. Are you just going to then take the card from the bottom and then show it to me?

Nathan. No just put it at the bottom of the deck. *(JESS puts the card at the bottom of the deck. NATHAN begins to shuffle the deck.)* Abracadabra Alakazam, make magic stuff happen *(Pause.)* man! *(He taps the deck and then spreads it across the table.)* Now let's look at these cards. Huh, it appears that there is a card that is turned over. Is that your card?

Jess. *(Satisfied with herself.)* No! HA!!! That is not my card!

Nathan. Are you sure?

Jess. Yep! You messed up!

Nathan. Jess look again.

Jess. *(Picking up the card.)* No! I specifically made sure to remember that it was the-*(She finally notices that the card is a blank card that says "Will you go out with me?")* Oh. *(She smiles a cheesy smile and looks at NATHAN.)*

Nathan. Are you sure that wasn't the card you were looking for?

Jess. Wow. That's really sweet.

Nathan. So, I think that this is the part where you say yes or no.

Jess. It's not my card. But yes.

(They both get really giddy, and they kiss each other. While they are kissing NATHAN reaches his hand out to the table and picks up a card.)

Nathan. And I know that wasn't your card. *(He shows her the card, it's the Six-of-Hearts.)* Because this was.

Scene 6:

(Change in location to Drive-in)

(JESS and NATHAN set up for the next scene. Car and drive in)

Present Nathan. June 15th, 2015. An advantage of dating an Autistic, we don't forget the dates of anniversaries, disadvantage of dating an Autistic, they often don't see the logic in celebrating them. See, when it comes to dating Autistics, there aren't really rules about anything; when it comes to dating Neurotypicals, there are rules about everything. So, early in our relationship, I had to get used to just being direct. Which, I guess, is kind of a rule.

(Lights come up showing the back of a car. NATHAN exits the driver side and JESS exits the passenger side.)

Nathan. *(Popping the trunk.)* Best seat in the house.

Jess. Well it's not a seat, it's a car.

Nathan. But there are seats in the car.

Present Nathan. We were at our local drive-in celebrating my completion of a few summer classes. We had been together for about a month; I hadn't yet realized that she was Autistic.

Jess. But we aren't going to be on the seats, we are going to be in the trunk.

Present Nathan. I can't believe I didn't pick up on it.

Nathan. Either way, good spot. I'm the best.

Jess. *(Smiling playfully.)* You're pretty good. *(They kiss.)*

(They start setting up blankets in the car.)

Jess. It was nice of your mother to let you and I borrow her car.

Nathan. You and me.

Jess. *(Thinks for a second.)* You and me.

Nathan. Yeah, I'm excited! The trailer looked really good!

Jess. Isn't Tomorrowland based on a ride at Disney?

Nathan. I think so. So, was Pirates of the Caribbean, right?

Jess. Yeah. Although they should have stopped after the first movie.

Nathan. But the first one was good. Plus, this movie has George Clooney, so it's probably not going to suck.

Present Nathan. It sucked.

(Jess checks her phone.)

Jess. Huh, did you see that Trump is the frontrunner now?

Nathan. Yeah, I heard. What a joke. I'll give him two more weeks.

(They laugh.)

Jess. Two whole weeks?

Nathan. Maybe we should hope that they pick him. There is no way that he would win the general.

Jess. Right?

Present Nathan. How young we were.

Nathan. It's nice to have someone that I can rant with. I love how feminist you are.

Jess. Boy, I'm feminasty.

Present Nathan. Again, we actually said that to each other.

(Nathan checks his phone.)

Nathan. Wait, I just got an email from the teacher, the final grades are posted.

Jess. Yeah, pull them up!

Nathan. One sec, there we go. B+!

Jess. Congrats!

Announcer. Welcome everyone to the family drive-in theatre! We'll be getting started here in about fifteen minutes. At this time, we'd like to encourage those who are here celebrating something to come up and tell us about it so we can give you a shout out. So, if anyone is here for a birthday, or anniversary, or something like that, come up and tell us about it.

Nathan. Huh. You know, we are celebrating something. I just finished summer classes and I'm getting ready for a new year. I'm just saying.

Jess. Would you like me to go up and tell them about it?

Nathan. I don't know, would I?

Jess. Would you?

Nathan. You know what would be really funny, though? If we gave them a joke name, or something like that.

Jess. Okay?

Nathan. Well I need to go to the bathroom.

Jess. Alright.

(NATHAN walks off stage, JESS goes over to talk to the announcer.)

Present Nathan. Like I said, I was used to dating Neurotypicals. You aren't supposed to be direct with them. Anyways, this interaction created a bit of confusion. You see, what she didn't know was that I was joking and what I didn't know was that she didn't know that I was joking. It's hard enough to be an Autistic dating a Neurotypical. It's even harder when you are an Autistic that thinks they are dating a Neurotypical.

(NATHAN and JESS return to the car.)

Nathan. Hey, I saw you over there.

Jess. Yes, you did.

Nathan. What was, umm, what was that about?

Jess. Wouldn't you like to know?

Nathan. I, I would.

Jess. Just wait.

Announcer. Welcome, everyone, to the Family Drive-In. We got one celebration tonight. There is a gentleman on the second screen who just finished up summer classes and has chosen to celebrate with us tonight, so I'd like to give a good shout-out to Mike Hunt.

Nathan. What?

(JESS is laughing, NATHAN is really nervous, but also laughing)

Announcer. Mike Hunt is now preparing for his junior year at James Madison University. So, we want to wish Mike Hunt a great new year, and once again thanks for choosing the Family Drive-In.

Present Nathan. It gets better.

Announcer. One thing we like to do for celebrations is to do a round of horns. So I'd like everyone to do a round of horns for Mike Hunt.

(A few car horns.)

Nathan. Oh my god! They are gonna kick us out.

Announcer. Come on, y'all can do better than that. Give a good round of horns for Mike Hunt.

(Lots of car horns.)

Jess. They are very horny for Mike Hunt.

(Lights begin to fade off of JESS and NATHAN.)

Present Nathan. I would have laughed harder if I wasn't so afraid that we would be banned for life. It was a really great moment for us. I finally understood how I needed to communicate with her, and she got one of the best laughs of her life. We now have a story that kills at parties. In hindsight, I probably should have figured out that I was meant to be with Autistics pretty early in my dating career. I had a very long list of failed relationships with Neurotypicals. I actually had a two-month curse for a while. It started my sophomore year of high school right after I had a really bad break-up after a yearlong relationship. I had that childish feeling that I would never love again and that the whole world had ended. Hey, even Autistics can be pathetic when it comes to romance. Anyways, I met a girl that summer. We started dating when school started. I asked her to homecoming. It was a wonderful night that came with the revelation that we were nothing alike. We had a mutual break-up a week later, about a week shy of two months. Then I had another relationship that spring, which ended with me getting dumped two days shy of two months. Then another "two weeks shy of two months" relationship the next winter and again the following spring. My freshman year of college, I finally broke the two-month streak, but then promptly got dumped a few weeks before our one-year anniversary. Look I'm not going to stand up here and say that they were bad people or

that I hate them or even that they wronged me. All of them were special people and each relationship taught me something. But the heart can only break so many times before you wonder if there is enough left over for when you finally find the right person. So as my relationship with Jess continued, I found myself terrified of being dumped at pretty much every milestone. After we got to two months and it didn't end, I was relieved, but I was still nervous that it was too good to be true. I learned never to take a relationship for granted.

Scene 7

(Change in location to Living room)

(NATHAN and JESS set up at a table. They are playing Cards Against Humanity. NATHAN is clearly drunk. ROOMMATE sits with them.)

Present Nathan. At the same time, I wasn't sure if love could develop again. Thankfully I was wrong but I kind of found out by accident. We were at my college apartment playing Cards Against Humanity with my roommate and I may have had a drink or two.

Roommate. I'm going to have to go with Rush Limbaugh's soft shitty body.

Nathan. *(Suring heavily.)* What? Kids with ass cancer always wins!

Present Nathan. Or maybe it was six drinks.

Jess. *(Takes the card.)* Yes! Thank you.

Nathan. God damnit!

Roommate. Your go Nathan.

Nathan. Alright! *(Takes a card.)* "War, what is it good for?" And give me something really good! Like a cow fart!

Present Nathan. Or eight.

Roommate. I got you man. *(Puts down a card.)*

Jess. *(Smirks.)* Oh. Ha. Oh yes! *(Puts cards down.)*

Nathan. Alright! "War, what is it good for?" *(Flips first card.)* "Some peace and god damn quiet." *(Everyone laughs.)* Oh that's a good one. *(Flips over the other card.)*

“Republicans.” (*NATHAN bursts out laughing.*) Oh god that is great! Republicans wins! Who had that?

Jess. Me!

Nathan. (*Hands her the card.*) God! I love you.

Jess. Oh.

(*NATHAN and JESS realize what NATHAN just said.*)

Present Nathan. You ever say the wrong thing at the wrong time in front of the wrong people with the wrong blood alcohol content? I remember being terrified. I just wanted to shrink into the couch cushions and disappear. But then I started to wonder.

Nathan. I need to grab some ice! (*Gets up, walks to a different room.*)

(*Change in location to Kitchen*)

Present Nathan. Did I? Did I love her? Could I? Did I still remember what love felt like?

Jess. I should probably go help him.

Roommate. Get ice?

Jess. Well you know. The little bastards stick together. (*Runs into the same room with NATHAN.*)

Roommate. (*Confused and oblivious.*) Okay.

Present Nathan. And if I did love her. Did I just screw everything up?

Jess. Hey.

Nathan. (*Still drunk but trying to not to be silly.*) Hey.

(*They stand awkwardly not know what to say.*)

Nathan. I’m sorry. I didn’t what the first time to be like that. I’m sorry.

Jess. Did you mean it?

Nathan. I don’t know. It just slipped out.

Jess. So, what does this mean.

Nathan. You deserve for the first time you hear that to be special. So, for now let's just say that it doesn't count. Let's spend more time reflecting on it before we decide if we are ready to start using that word.

Jess. Alright, no problem.

Nathan. Great. *(He heads back and rejoins ROOMMATE.)*

(JESS watches NATHAN walk away.)

Jess. *(Under her breath.)* I think I love you too.

(ROOMMATE, JESS, and NATHAN exit.)

Present Nathan. Love is both a reaction and a realization. For me, it took an unconscious message to realize it for the first time. For her, it took hearing the word. "Love". Love is the word that the English language has chosen to classify nature's chemical way of tricking us into reproduction and the companionship necessary for the survival of our species. Logically, I knew that. But when that word slipped out of my mouth I suddenly had given meaning to the growing connection that I had been feeling for months.

Scene 8

(Change in location to Living room)

(JESS and NATHAN enter. They sit on a couch snuggled up to each other.)

Present Nathan. A few weeks later.

Nathan. Hey Jess. Can I ask you something?

Jess. You can.

Nathan. I'm not saying I'm going to. But, if I were to use the "L" word in direct reference to you right now, would you say it back?

Jess. *(Thinks for a bit.)* Yes.

Nathan. *(Thinks for a while.)* I love you.

Jess. I love you, too.

(JESS and NATHAN exit.)

Present Nathan. So, began the usage of the word love. I felt more comfortable with what we had and more confident that it was what we both wanted. At the same time, I also felt as if this meant that I had more to lose. I could never shake the fear that one day it would just end abruptly. The next milestone was a year. As the one-year mark approached I kept getting more and more nervous.

Scene 9

(Change in location to phone call, Jess is on the couch and Nathan is pacing)

(JESS and NATHAN enter with phones.)

Present Nathan. Then one day...

Jess. *(On the phone, clearly upset.)* Hey Nathan.

Nathan. Hey Jess, what's up?

Jess. I really need to talk to you.

Present Nathan. The scariest thing a partner can tell you.

Nathan. *(Nervous.)* Alright, do you want me to come over?

Jess. Yes, and then can we head to the arboretum to talk.

Nathan. Alright. I'll be there in a half-hour.

Jess. Thanks, see you soon. *(Hangs up.)*

Nathan. *(Hangs up.)* Shit. *(Heads towards his car.)*

Present Nathan. Cue the speculative internal monologue.

Nathan. This is it. This is where it ends. It's a few weeks shy of a year and now it is going to end. She is going to dump me. No, she's not. Yes, she is. I've heard that tone before. I know what that tone means. I'm autistic, why am I trusting my ability to read a tone? Maybe she isn't trying to dump me. What if she's pregnant? Shit! She's pregnant! I'm not ready to be a father! In nine months, I'll still be finishing up my senior year of college. I won't be able to take care of a kid. What's worse being dumped or pregnancy?

What if she is going to dump me because she is pregnant! What if she's dying? That would be better. Wait no! That would be much worse! What's the widower version of a boyfriend? Damn it stop speculating! *(Pause.)* She going to dump me. She's pregnant. She's going to dump me. She's pregnant. She is defiantly going to dump me. Why did I expect this would be different?

(Gets out of the car. Walks to JESS.)

Present Nathan. I knew all this speculation was unhealthy. Whatever was bothering her I needed to be there for her. I needed to listen to what she had to say and let her talk at her own rate.

(Change in location to Jess' house)

Nathan. You sounded upset, why are you upset. I'm really sorry. Why are you upset?

Present Nathan. Nailed it.

Jess. I got laid off.

Nathan. *(Clearly relieved but trying to show empathy.)* Oh. Right. Of course. That is bad. That is. I am so sorry.

Jess. My company was making cutbacks and they prioritized workers based on years employed.

Nathan. Those bastards. What an awful situation.

Jess. Are you okay?

Nathan. *(Blurting out.)* I thought you were going to dump me.

Jess. What?

Nathan. We are almost to our one year and things are going great and I thought you were going to dump me.

Jess. Why would I dump you if things are going great?

Nathan. Because that is what always seems to happen.

Jess. So, let me get this straight then. You thought that I called you over to come take me to the arboretum. The location of our first date. So that I could dump you and then have the most awkward car ride home.

Nathan. You know, when you put it like that, I...perhaps I was over speculating.

Jess. Nathan. I know you've been hurt before, but I would never do something like that to you.

Nathan. I'm sorry, it's just that I have heard that before.

Jess. What?

Nathan. "I'd never hurt you" or "I'll never break up with you."

Jess. I'm not saying that I'd never hurt you. I'm sure that I will at some point. People make mistakes in relationships that result in their partners getting hurt. I can't even promise that I'll never break up with you. Maybe we won't work out in the end. But what I'd never do is hurt you out of malice or break up with you out of the blue. If our relationship is ever in trouble, I would tell you so that we could work on it.

Nathan. I'm sorry.

Jess. For what?

Nathan. For assuming the worst. You deserved more credit than that. It's just that we have something that I like, and I want. I'm afraid to lose it.

Jess. Me too. But you aren't in danger of that right now.

Nathan. And you just got fired-

Jess. Laid off.

Nathan. Laid off and you're upset.

Jess. Yep.

Nathan. Tell me about what happened, then we will figure out the next step together.

Present Nathan. And we did. After a few weeks we were able to find her a new job. And we made it to one year. We have been together for three years now, and something tells me she is here to stay, because she moved to here with me. This is significant, because we're from Virginia. For those of you who are adept at geography, you know that Virginia and Iowa are not close. I mean, Iowa folks are so friendly they "soorey" me to death every time they bump into me at the store. In Virginia, people are polite because

they assume that you have a gun. Think of it as politeness by mutually assured destruction. So, Jess moving with me to Iowa was a big step for us.

Scene 10

(Change in location to phone call, Jess is on the couch and Nathan is pacing)

(JESS and NATHAN enter and take out phones.)

Present Nathan. When I first broached the possibility of taking the deal for Iowa with Jess, I called her up and I told her...

Nathan. *(On the phone.)* This would mean me moving to the Midwest. I'd like to ask you something but I really don't want to pressure you.

Jess. Hey, it's okay. We are partners. You can ask me.

Nathan. Is that something you could ever see yourself doing with me?

Jess. Moving to the Midwest?

Nathan. Yeah.

Jess. I don't know; that's a big step.

Nathan. Take as much time as you need.

Jess. Okay, I'll think about it.

Present Nathan. Now, in my mind, I was just putting it on her radar. In her mind, I was asking her to move in with me. Two days later she calls me and says,

Jess. Fuck it! Let's move to the Midwest!

Nathan. *(Long pause.)* Wait, really?

Jess. Yeah!

Nathan. It's been two days.

Jess. Yeah!

Nathan. *(Scared.)* You sure you don't need an extra week?

Jess. Nope!

Nathan. Or ten?

Jess. Nope!

Nathan. Okay. Well, I have to go do my *(Pause.)* other stuff.

Jess. Okay. Love you! Can't wait to move in! Bye!

(They both hang up. JESS exits.)

Nathan. Shit!

Present Nathan. At that moment I realized...

Nathan. I don't know if I'm ready for that! I wouldn't move to Iowa with me, why would she want to?

(NATHAN Exits.)

Present Nathan. And you can't very well tell your partner that. You can't ask them to think about moving in with you and be like, "Wait. What was that? No bad connection, bad connection. Let's talk more about it in a few months." No, that would be like telling people that you wanted to lower taxes on the middle class, but actually fucking them over so rich people can pay less. Also, Autistics don't always handle change very well. We spent all of this time trying to talk to Neurotypicals in Virginia and now we would need to figure out how to talk to Neurotypicals in Iowa. No offense, but Iowans are the worst Neurotypicals. Iowans are friendly but not polite. Meaning that you can have conversations about things you don't care about with people you don't like for hours. Which can sometimes be difficult for Autistics. Let me explain, this is what you all sound like to us...

Scene 11

(Change in location to grocery store)

(JESS and CASHIER enter.)

Jess. Alright just the two rotisserie chickens.

Cashier. (*Overly nice and with a terrible impression of an Iowan accent.*) Ah, garlic herb! I haven't tried that yet! Is it good?

Jess. (*Awkwardly trying to wrap up the conversation.*) I like it well enough.

Cashier. (*Awkwardly trying not to wrap up the conversation.*) They make good rotisserie chickens!

Jess. They do.

Cashier. Full dinner!

Jess. Yep.

Cashier. Now all you need is a side!

Jess. Or you could just turn it into stock.

Present Nathan. Big mistake.

Cashier. What do you mean by stock?

Jess. (*Obviously not wanting to continue talking.*) Like soup, using the bones to make soup.

Cashier. Oh, so like broth! How do you do that?

Jess. Get a pot, fill it up with water, put the chicken bones in, boil the water, and let it soak for a while.

Cashier. Oh, and you turn that into soup?

Present Nathan. Christ! Is someone holding a gun to your head?

Jess. Yes, we make it into soup.

Cashier. Is it good?

Jess. Yes, it is quite good.

Cashier. Well you have yourself a wonderful soup tonight!

Jess. Thanks, you too. I mean night, have a good night.

Cashier. (*Waving and still very Iowan.*) Wash. Corn. Creek. Roof.

(*JESS and CRASHIER exit.*)

Present Nathan. Now the cashier did not actually care about the process of making chicken stock and Jess did not want to explain it to a stranger. Yet she felt like she needed to accommodate this horribly awkward situation. Something that if we moved to Iowa, she would have to deal with. Which brings us to the main problem with asking her to move her with me. I don't really deserve her. And I don't mean that in the cliché sort of, "I'm such a horrible person," type of way. No, I strongly believe that I am slightly less of a shit person than a majority of the population. But Jess...

Scene 12

(*Change in location to phone call, Jess is on the couch and Nathan is pacing*)

(*JESS and NATHAN enter.*)

Present Nathan. is way ahead of me in that department. Sometimes she will randomly call me and be like...

Jess. Hey, I just wanted to see how you were doing and let you know that I am thinking about you, and I love you, and I am so proud of you, and I can't wait to be in your arms again.

Present Nathan. And then literally half the time I'll just be like...

Nathan. Thanks babe. (*Thumbs up.*) (*Looks conspiratorially at the audience.*)

Present Nathan. She is also a lot more socially aware than me. And I don't mean that politically; I know a lot more about politics than she does. I mean that she has the ability to understand social constructs better than I do most of the time. One of our favorite pastimes is watching movies from our childhood and trying to analyze them from an adult perspective.

Scene 13

(*Change in location to living room*)

(*JESS and NATHAN enter. JESS sits on a couch. NATHAN begins setting up the movie*)

Present Nathan. When I say adult perspective, I mean nit-picky autistic perspective. For example, we recently re-watched “American Tale”.

Nathan. I remember this movie having a lot of interesting commentary related to immigration. I pretty sure it didn’t suck.

Present Nathan. It sucked.

Jess. Alright let’s try it.

(NATHAN sits on the couch.)

Nathan. The animation has not aged well.

Present Nathan. When Jess and I watch movies we often pause it every ten minutes to either discuss the social implications of what we are seeing or criticize cartoon physics.

Jess. How does he still have his hat? It was off his head in the last shot and now he just pulls it out of his ass?

Nathan. I think he has a belt on his back.

Jess. Oh, and now he is jumping through a storm and the hat just stays on his head? What does it have super glue?

Nathan. Maybe it’s just a tight hat.

Jess. Oh no! They don’t get to pull that crap. They keep making it a point to show that the hat is too big for him.

Nathan. Jess. Can you not criticize every little aspect of this movie?

Jess. Fine.

Present Nathan. Now I can often look past cartoon physics but the one thing I cannot tolerate in movies, even kid’s movies, is logical fallacies.

Nathan. Never say never? You just said it twice! Your statement refutes its own premise.

Jess. It’s about maintaining hope.

Nathan. Bullshit! He is making a demand that cannot possibly be carried out while in the process being a god damn hypocrite! It’s a logical fallacy!

Jess. It's not logically phallic. When people say that they are acknowledging that depending on the circumstances it is appropriate to say never.

Nathan. Jess. I think you mean fallacious. Phallic means that it looks like a dick.

Jess. Right.

Nathan. And secondly. They are saying never say never. They are making an absolutist argument that defeats itself with its own absolutism by not practicing absolutism.

Jess. Can you not criticize every little aspect of this movie?

(NATHAN and JESS exit.)

Present Nathan. We autistics often have trouble letting things go.

Scene 14

(Change in location to car)

(JESS and NATHAN begin setting up for the next scene.)

Present Nathan. All of this brings us back to the question of moving here together. You see when we first visited Iowa, I was still unsure about how I felt about us moving in together. But as we toured the campus and met more people, we both looked at each other and knew that this was where we would spend the next few years of our lives. This is major for two reasons, one: we are two autistics that understood each other's nonverbals, and two: we had a practical path that we could take our lives together.

(NATHAN and JESS get into a car, JESS is in the driver's seat.)

Present Nathan. While we were driving back from Iowa after the visit I sat there just thinking. Thinking about us. Thinking about what defines us. What could define us. What she looks like when she's naked. Sorry, I have a very wild train of thought.

Jess. What is it?

Nathan. Nothing, just...thanks for taking this trip with me.

Jess. Of course.

Present Nathan. And while we were having this tender moment...

(JESS and NATHAN suddenly notice something hurtling towards them on the road.)

Jess. Oh fuck!

Nathan. What the hell is that!

(They hit the object which launches the car into the air.)

Jess. FUUUUUUCK!!

Nathan. *(Simultaneously.)* SHIIIIIIIIIT!!

(Car crashes down to the ground.)

Jess. Oh my fucking god! *(Honks the horn.)* You better fucking pull over.

Nathan. I'm alive.

Jess. Get the fuck over!

Nathan. I really need to be a better person.

(They pull over the car.)

Jess. *(Extremely anger.)* I can't fucking believe this shit! I can't fucking afford to get this car fixed!

Nathan. Can we just appreciate these mountains for a second?

Jess. I don't have enough money this month!

Nathan. Oh my god, it's been three days since my last cheeseburger.

Jess. It's a brand-new fucking car!

(TRUCKER comes running to the car. He comes to NATHAN'S side. JESS tries to compose herself.)

Trucker. Are you guys alright?

Nathan. I think so.

Trucker. Damnit, I just had that part installed?

Jess. *(Trying to stay calm.)* What was it?

Trucker. It was a battery. Anyways, let me grab my insurance information. I'll pay for damages.

(JESS gets out of the car and goes off with the TRUCKER. They silently talk.)

Present Nathan. As I sat there pondering the meaning of life and wondering if existence is pointless because our consciousness just dissolves into oblivion when we die. I realized that if I had died there, it would have been with her. And that would have been okay. Not okay that I died but okay that my last moments would have been spent with her.

(JESS, NATHAN, and TRUCKER all exit.)

Present Nathan. The trucker kept his word. All damages were paid, and Jess was able to get her car fixed. It all worked out for the most part. But I knew there was one more thing I needed to do.

Scene 15

(Change in location to phone call, Jess is on the couch and Nathan is pacing)

(JESS and NATHAN enter they are holding phones.)

Present Nathan. Eventually, I called her back.

Nathan. *(On the phone.)* Hey Jess?

Jess. Hey, babe. What's going on?

Nathan. I just wanted to say something real quick.

Jess. Yeah?

Nathan. I can't wait to move to Iowa with you, and I can think of no one with who I would rather share my life with.

(Long pause.)

Jess. Whom.

Nathan. Whom.

Present Nathan. We moved in together, in Iowa. It was a test for our relationship. We lived together for one semester. We both grew as people together. But as we grew, we started to feel less and less like we should continue to be boyfriend girlfriend. Sometimes that's just how it goes. So, on December 21, 2017, I asked her to marry me, and she said yes. Afterwards I fell onto the floor and practically screamed. On May 26, 2018 we got married.

Scene 16

(Change in location to living room)

(NATHAN and DAD enter and sit down facing each other.)

Present Nathan. And I'll never forget the Autistic advice that my Autistic father gave me right before the wedding.

Nathan. So, I'm about to get married.

Dad. So, it would seem, but you aren't married yet.

Nathan. So, is this the part where you give me some kind of fatherly advice about marriage?

Dad. *(Thinks for a little.)* Marriage can be summed up by two words.

Nathan. Yeah?

Dad. Yes ma'am.

Nathan. *(Laughs a little.)* Well that seems a little problematic.

Dad. Why?

Nathan. Doesn't that imply an unequal power dynamic.

Dad. Eventually you stop seeing your relationship through the lens of power dynamics.

Nathan. But doesn't "yes ma'am" create power dynamics.

Dad. No because power implies sides. Remember, from now on you are always on the same side. Even when you aren't. When she succeeds you succeed and when you succeed, she succeeds. Even when you're working against each other, you're working for each other. The most important thing is that you are always good to each other.

Nathan. Yes sir.

Scene 17

(Change in location to blank stage)

Present Nathan. And then I walked out and got married. The interesting thing is that it didn't feel much different on a practical level. We are still the same people and we care about each other the same amount. I guess it was just nice to have the State also recognize that. So, there you go. Two people meet, they fall in love, and they get married. Classic story and classic happy ending. One that I wasn't supposed to have. Disability is pitied and therefore, it's a sensitive subject. The disability is not separate from the person. We don't want to draw attention to the disability, so we divert attention away from the person, which means that their story is not heard. My story is not heard. The therapist who said...

Troll. Autistics don't have sex.

Present Nathan....was only a part of the problem, and only a part of the story. The funny part of the story. I have been told my whole life that

Troll. Autistics don't have romances!

Present Nathan. When one of my exes told her grandmother that she was with an Autistic her grandmother said...

Troll. Well that's never going to work.

Present Nathan. When my now mother-in-law told a coworker that her daughter was dating an Autistic the coworker said...

Troll. Aren't you worried he might be dangerous?

Present Nathan. Right now, there is a 4chan comment thread about a YouTube video that I did with a girl I was dating at the time with comments that say, and I quote...

Troll. Some fake-ass Autistic dude has a girlfriend better looking than any girlfriend I ever had.

Present Nathan. And another that says...

Troll. He has a cute girlfriend and friends. That alone right there shows me he is not Autistic.

Present Nathan. I used to be scared to tell girls I was interested in that I'm Autistic because I thought they would view me as a lost cause. Why shouldn't they? Society seemed to have given up on me. But I have been with some amazing people of the years. And although my other relationships didn't work out, they taught me that it was possible to be loved, not despite my Autism, but because of it. So, when I met Jess, it was one of the first things I told her. Because if a person sees my Autism as a barrier to loving me than they don't deserve to see what that love looks like. Our story deserves to be heard because right now there are millions of Autistics around the world that believe that the only thing standing between them and love is their identity. And they need to know that love is possible. They need to know that their love matters. It's up to all of us to spread that message.

(JESS enters.)

Present Nathan. Whether you're Autistic or Neurotypical, it's up to you and I.

Jess. You and me.

Present Nathan. Seriously?

Jess. I'm sorry but you can't end a call to action on a grammatical error.

Present Nathan. I'm spilling my heart out here.

Nathan. *(Entering.)* How did you screw that one up? Come on. It's up to I? No. It's up to me.

Present Nathan. You're taking her side? I'd think that you of all people would be with me on this one.

Nathan. Please. You argue with yourself more than you argue with your brother-in-law. Narcissist.

Present Nathan. Hey! That was uncalled for.

Nathan. You made your master's thesis a play about yourself.

Jess. *(To the audience.)* You see what I got to deal with?

Nathan and Present Nathan. Love you!

Jess. Love you, too.

Nathan. Well, I know we could do this all day, but I need to go give a presentation for Cate's class.

Present Nathan. The one about Wolfenstein?

Nathan. Yeah.

Present Nathan. Oh.

Nathan. What? How did I do?

Present Nathan. (*Obviously lying.*) Hmmm. Oh, wonderfully. You nail it.

Nathan. (*Oblivious.*) Great! See you later! (*Exits.*)

Jess. Does he actually do well?

Present Nathan. No, he totally bombs it.

Jess. Oh. I should probably get ready to comfort him.

Present Nathan. Yeah, he'll need that.

Jess. Well, I guess I'll see you soon.

Present Nathan. Yeah. You too.

(*JESS exits.*)

Present Nathan. I still don't think that I deserve her. But with all my flaws, this amazing girl seems to want me. And I think that she deserves what she wants.

End of Play

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

I started this project with the intention of educating neurotypicals about Autism and with hopes to empower Autistics. In the process of doing so, I empowered and educated myself. A majority of research on Autism focuses on children. This focus further perpetuates Autism as a child centric disorder (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). Romance is not associated with children and, therefore, it is not associated with Autism. During the process of writing this thesis, I realized *Aut is Love* is a form of resistance. The performance resists a societal structure that invalidates the experiences of those on the Spectrum. This story of resistance is the story of my life; it is me. If my story is a form of resistance, then my existence is a form of resistance. Through *Aut is Love*, I put my existence on display to reveal an Autistic who is also adult, romantic, empathetic, and (hopefully) relatable.

My play was a critical performance or “a means to understand and reform the institution that discipline our minds and bodies” (Pineau, 2002, p. 41). I critique societal institutions and structures of neuronormativity in romantic stories. However, critical work cannot just point out flaws, it must also address how to fix them. Critical performance about neuronormativity must establish prescriptions for tearing down the structures of neuronormativity. In this conclusion, I discuss how *Aut Is Love* demonstrates a violation of expectations through Autistic performance, adopts a social model of disability, and expands understandings of empathy.

Critiquing and Upholding Stereotypes

The fact that the two main characters in *Aut Is Love* are Autistic violates a stereotype of Autism. As discussed, the primary misconception *Aut Is Love* debunks is the perception of Autistics as aromantic. Other stereotypes are upheld and critiqued through the ways in which Present Nathan and Nathan perform as both Neurotypical and Autistic. Present Nathan maintains eye contact with the audience and wears formal clothes while also breaking social norms by talking about sex and politics. Nathan performs Autism and Neurotypicality as he attempts subtly in conversations while also being oblivious to sarcasm. *Aut Is Love* is my autoethnographic account of romance, and it plays on conventional romantic comedy narratives with variations specific to my experience, which also function as a critique of social constructions of romance and Autism. Each stereotype is based on my experience of expectations put upon me by Neurotypicals I have interacted with in society.

One stereotype that I wanted to address is the idea that Autistics are cold and calculating rather than spontaneous. While it is true that most of the time I prefer to have plans, I often wait till the last minute to make those plans. Thus, I tend to be more spontaneous than others in the Autism community. For example, in the play, I tell the story of the first time I told Jess “I love you.” I was drunk and I just blurted it out. To this day, I feel guilty that the first time that Jess heard those words from me was during a drunken haze. It was this moment that Jess realized that she loved me too. The realization of love was emotional and spontaneous rather than calculated and logical. However,

immediately after this scene, Present Nathan upholds the stereotype by defining love as “nature’s chemical way of tricking us into reproduction and the companionship necessary for the survival of our species.” Through this scene I recognize that I have a logical definition of love while also having an emotional implementation of love.

In another scene, I demonstrate how I coped with a traumatic experience. My desire in the scene is to establish that Autistics can be funny in the face of trauma, rather than meltdown. In the scene Jess and I are driving back from our initial visit to Iowa when a part falls off of the truck in front of us, causing us to have a car accident. When this event happened in real life it was terrifying. To this day, I get nervous every time I drive behind a gas tanker. I remember feeling thankful to be alive as I sat in the passenger seat on the side of the road. Part of coping with this trauma was to turn it into a humorous scene in my play. Rather than portraying the scene through the lens of terror, I decided to use the moment to characterize the differences in how Jess and I reacted to a near death experience. Jess was angry and thinking ahead about how to fix her car, while I was just happy to be alive. Nathan is commenting on how beautiful the mountains are while Jess is screaming, “I can’t fucking believe this shit! I can’t fucking afford to get this car fixed!” The contradiction creates humor on stage and breaks the tension of a traumatic experience. Thus, I demonstrate that Autistics can find ways of coping with traumatic experiences.

Finally, I also wanted to demonstrate the reality of some stereotypes. The monologue at the end of the play is one of the few serious moments. I wanted to create tension with the audience, to move the audience to tears. Then, I wanted to completely

uproot that emotion by having Jess humorously correct the narrator's grammar. It is a stereotype that Autistics love correcting people even at inappropriate times. Jess and I have often been in serious conversations in which we randomly corrected each other's grammar amid intense emotions. This is a relationship dynamic that I wanted to portray in the story. In this scene, Jess tells me "You can't end a call to action on a grammatic error." There is then banter between Nathan, Present Nathan, and Jess for the rest of the play. I wanted to ensure that there was a blatant serious message that my audience received from the play. I also wanted to violate their expectations and remind them that they are still watching a comedy.

Performing a Social Model Approach

Before I learned about the social model approach to disability, I practiced the ideology. The models of disability were instrumental in the framing of the story line as well as the creation of the final message in *Aut Is Love*. A person who follows the social model of disability discourse is inclined to believe that disability is not separate from the person (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017; Mackelprang, 2010; Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2016; Goodely, 2001; Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Olkin, 2002). In *Aut Is Love*, I present a character that is flawed but not hopeless, oblivious but caring, and awkward but social.

Mackelprang (2010) explains that while a medical model ideology would advocate for person-first language (person with Autism) a social model ideology would embrace identity-first language (Autistic). Though the medical model does not fault the person, it assumes that disability is inherently bad and separates a person from their

disability. However, my play argues that capitulation to this separation is problematic. During my final monologue, I state, “although my other relationships didn’t work out, they taught me that it was possible to be loved, not despite my Autism, but because of it.” This line proclaims both that Autism is an inseparable part of who I am while also presenting a counternarrative to the medical model idea that disability is something to look past (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2016)

I issue a direct refutation of the medical model by stating, “Disability is pitied and therefore, it’s a sensitive subject. The disability is not separate from the person. We don’t want to draw attention to the disability, so we divert attention away from the person, which means that their story is not heard.” The social model approach views disability as an identity marginalized by society (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017; Mackelprang, 2010; Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2016; Goodely, 2001; Haegle & Hodge, 2016; Olkin, 2002). Thus, the most disabling factor of disability is the manner in which society treats it, necessitating that disability be treated as a sub-culture. Understanding of a sub-culture comes not from medical science but from storytelling. In my play, I argue that the view of disability as a condition to pity, deemphasizes individual experiences and social consequences of being disabled.

I also subtly reject the medical model by never discussing diagnoses. While I was diagnosed with Autism at the age of 9, Jess got her diagnosis in January 2019, after the events of the play. She was not able to get a diagnosis as a child due to a mix of her socio-economic status, gender, and geographic location. A medical model ideology views the diagnosis as integral and prioritizes treatment (Mackelprang, 2010). However, Jess

faced a lot of social problems that arose because of her Autism. She had trouble connecting with other students, she did not have many friends, and, as stated in the play, I was the only person with whom she ever had a romantic relationship. The lack of a diagnosis did not mean that her experiences did not matter or were not part of the Autistic experience. Thus, I did not feel the need to directly say whether or not Jess had a diagnosis during the events of the play.

Moving forward, there are several ways in which this play demonstrates that we can incorporate social model thinking into how we discuss Autism. First, I personally use identity-first language in my script. If an Autistic prefers person-first language that should be respected. However, the fact that ableism has stigmatized Autism to the point where many Autistics do want to be labeled as being separate from their condition is its own problem. My performance attempts to create a world where Autistics feel comfortable embracing their identity as Autistic. As long as there are still Autistics that prefer person-first language, that world has not been built. Second, *Aut Is Love* avoids pity. Pity is dehumanizing. Autistics do not want their stories to be viewed as a sob story nor do we want our “normal life” to be inspirational. Do not tolerate our existence, accept it. Finally, understand that even without a diagnosis, Autistics still struggle. Jess did not receive a diagnosis until earlier this year. She did not have access to it due to both her gender and her socio-economic status. Her lack of access is a structural barrier, not a medical one. Therefore, do not delegitimize self-diagnosis.

Expanding Understanding of Empathy

Current research on Autism and empathy concludes that Autistics do not completely lack empathy, but rather lack cognitive empathy (Baron-Cohen & Wheelright, 2004; Mul, Stagg, Herblin, & Aspell, 2018; Koegel, et al., 2016; Holt et al., 2018; Dziobek et al., 2008). Autistics do experience high levels of affective empathy, meaning that they have a desire to do the right thing for another's feelings (Koegel et al., 2016). In my literature review, I made the argument that the measure of cognitive empathy is primarily based on neuronormativity. Thus, Autistics are likely to have greater levels of cognitive empathy when compared to other Autistics. There are several places in my script that I demonstrate this. These examples can be seen through Nathan's attempts to perform neurotypicality. My script is uniquely positioned to critique societal views of Autism and empathy.

Early in the script, I point out that prior to dating Jess, I dated neurotypicals. I had learned that subtlety was important to neurotypicals and directness was impolite. Thus, performing subtly eventually became a habit, especially before I realized that Jess was Autistic. There is a scene in the script in which I make a joke to Jess that she does not realize is a joke. We are at the drive-in and the man on the loud speaker asks for people to report if they are celebrating any important events. Nathan turns to Jess and says, "You know what would be really funny, though? If we gave them a joke name, or something like that." I then get up to go to the bathroom, leaving Jess confused. She then gets up to

go talk to the man on the loud speaker. While she is doing this, my narrator character says,

I was used to dating Neurotypicals. You aren't supposed to be direct with them. Anyways, this interaction created a bit of confusion. You see, what she didn't know was that I was joking and what I didn't know was that she didn't know that I was joking. It's hard enough to be an Autistic dating a Neurotypical. It's even harder when you are an Autistic that thinks they are dating a Neurotypical.

The scene continues as the man on the loud speaker gives a shout-out to "Mike Hunt" and Nathan realizes that Jess took his words literally. This scene appears to perpetuate the theory that Autistics lack cognitive empathy. However, the only reason why Nathan did not directly tell Jess that he was joking was because he assumed that she would pick up on it as a neurotypical. I was performing neurotypicality in this scene. If I had known she was Autistic than I would have talked to her the way I prefer people to talk to me: bold and direct. In hindsight, I am glad that I did not know she was Autistic at the time. We might not have had this hilarious story to tell.

In another scene, I get a call from Jess telling me "We need to talk." As an individual who has experience with dating, my immediate assumption is that she is getting ready to dump me. This assumption was based on past experiences in neurotypical relationships. The dreaded phrase, "We need to talk," had always resulted in breakups. When I arrive at her house, she reveals that she was laid off at work. I am elated; she is not dumping me! Here, I read between the lines, but, as an Autistic, Jess rarely communicates subtly. I projected neurotypicality onto Jess and, thus, misunderstood what she was communicating. Later in the scene, she points out that I was thinking like a neurotypical.

My final example of empathy is the scene in which we discuss moving to Iowa for graduate school. In this scene, Jess projects neurotypicality onto me. I call Jess to ask her if she could ever see herself moving to Iowa. In this scene, Jess thinks there is meaning beyond my words and assumes I am asking her to move with me. Neurotypicals tend to give their partners subtle hints with the intention of giving them a chance to take initiative. Autistics are less inclined to do this. If I had wanted a quick answer, I would have asked for one.

All three of these examples demonstrate how miscommunication happens between Autistics. Interestingly, each miscommunication is caused by our attempts to perform neurotypicality. Thus, I am presenting the argument that if we compare an Autistics ability to empathize with a neurotypical, not only will the Autistic come up short but so will the neurotypical. However, the scenes in which Jess and I are direct with each other are scenes in which we have a better understanding of what the other wants. If we stop imposing a narrow neuronormative narrative on the way that Autistics interact with each other, then we can allow Autistics to have more fulfilling and open relationships. *Aut Is Love* makes the following arguments: Stop trying to establish “rules” of dating. Stop assuming that if a person does not always know what their partner is thinking or what they want, that means they do not care. Mind reading should not be a requirement for a fulfilling relationship.

Conclusion

The show itself was received positively. Tickets were sold out all three nights and I received positive feedback during the question and answer sessions after the play. Approximately three hundred people saw the play live. I also posted a recording of the performance on YouTube, which has received over a thousand views. However, I hope that my message extends beyond those that viewed this play. While I believe that my story is worth hearing, my story is not the only one out there. There are many other Autistics that have stories just like mine that need to be heard. There are Autistics that have faced varied experiences due to intersectional marginalization. Those stories cannot be left behind, and they cannot be ignored.

I created an autoethnographic critical performance to demonstrate the fact that Autistics are capable of romance. To do so I portrayed the ways in which my wife Jess and I communicate with each other and how that communication is influenced by the fact that we are both Autistics.

Chapter two reviewed existing literature on the social model of disability discourse to establish my philosophical approach to this project. Then I laid out the research on Autism and empathy, and I discussed that current research on empathy is carried out from a neuronormative approach. Next, I discussed the research on Autism and romantic desire, demonstrating that a majority of Autistics do have romantic desires despite societal misconceptions. Next, I discussed research on Autistics pursuing relationships and how sometimes, a lack of understanding of social norms can lead Autistics to engage in inappropriate relationship seeking activities. Finally, I discussed

the research on Autistics in relationships that demonstrated a greater level fulfillment from relationships with two Autistics.

In Chapter three I laid out the methods that I used to create the script, direct the play, and perform the parts. The first method I used was Critical performance, meaning that the purpose of my performance was to critique societal structures regarding Autism. My next section discussed Autoethnography, which was used due to the fact that I was telling my own story. I also used the Social model of disability as a methodology by ensuring that Autistics were treated as a social group in both the writing and performing. The last two methods I discussed were the performance of disability and the performance of Autism in general, which I used in a literal sense due to the fact that my play requires the performing of Autism.

Chapter four was the script of my play and it argues: *Autistics are capable of romance (and their experiences of romance are diverse), Autism should not be considered a barrier to love, and stories of Autism and romance must be heard.*

Future performances are necessary to create a broader range of Autistic romantic comedy (rom com). Thus, I believe we need to create the Autistic rom com and an established genre. Neurotypical rom coms are all different even though they have common themes. So must be the case with Autistic rom coms. I do not want my play to be a go-to explanation of the Autistic romantic experience. I want it to be one of many. Even with my marginalized identity, I am still privileged by other aspects of who I am. I am a cisgender, white, heterosexual, male that grew up in the upper-middle class. Other than my Autism, I am the embodiment of privilege. Thus, my play cannot be a diversity

checkmark. There must be more stories that are told about intersectional Autistics and their romances. Nobody who reads my script or watches my play should have any delusions that they understand the Autistic experience. I do not even fully understand the Autistic experience and the Autistic experience is my life. My play cannot be the only one written on this subject. My story cannot be the only one told.

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